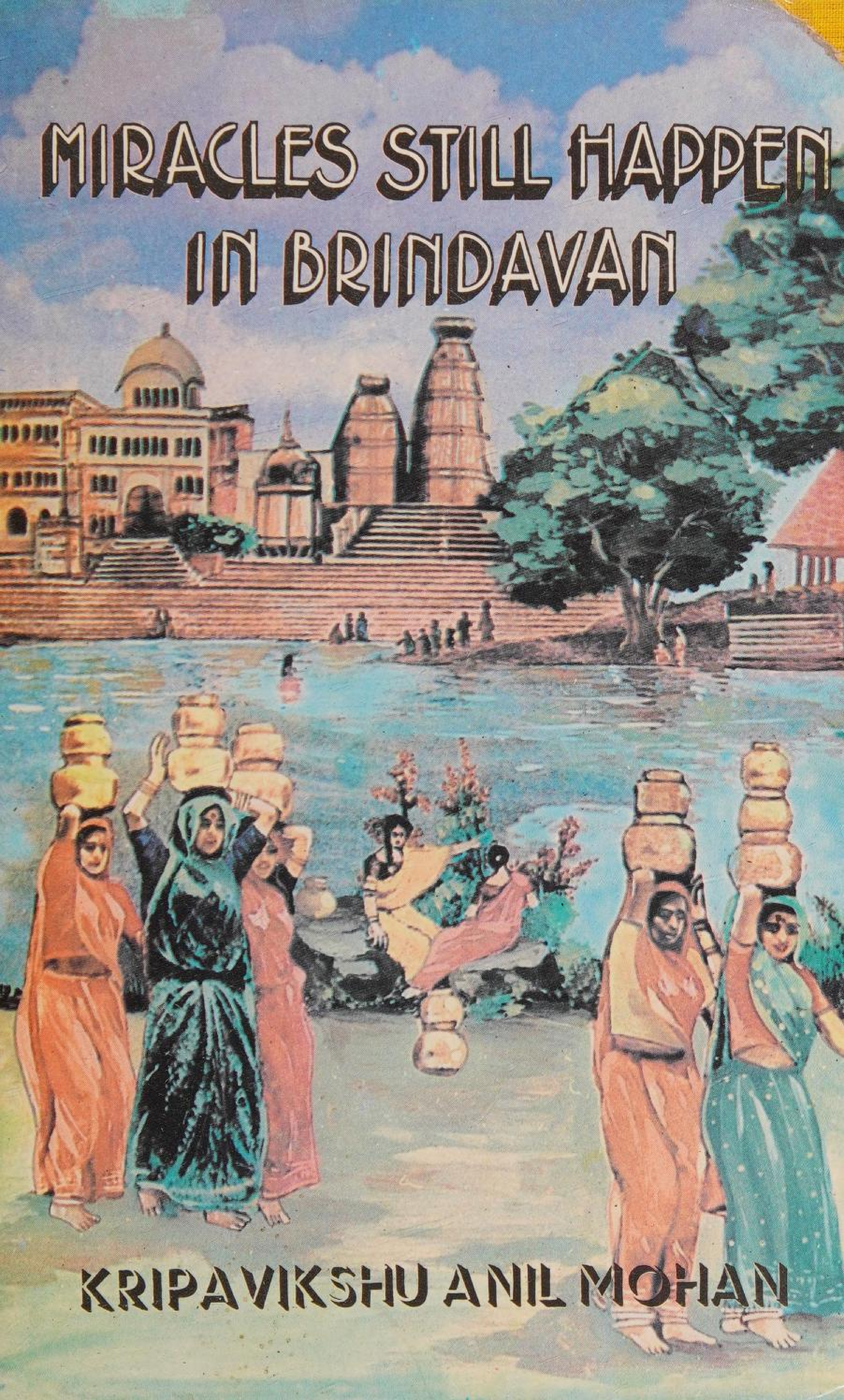
MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN IN BRINDAVAN



KRIPAVIKSHU ANIL MOHAN

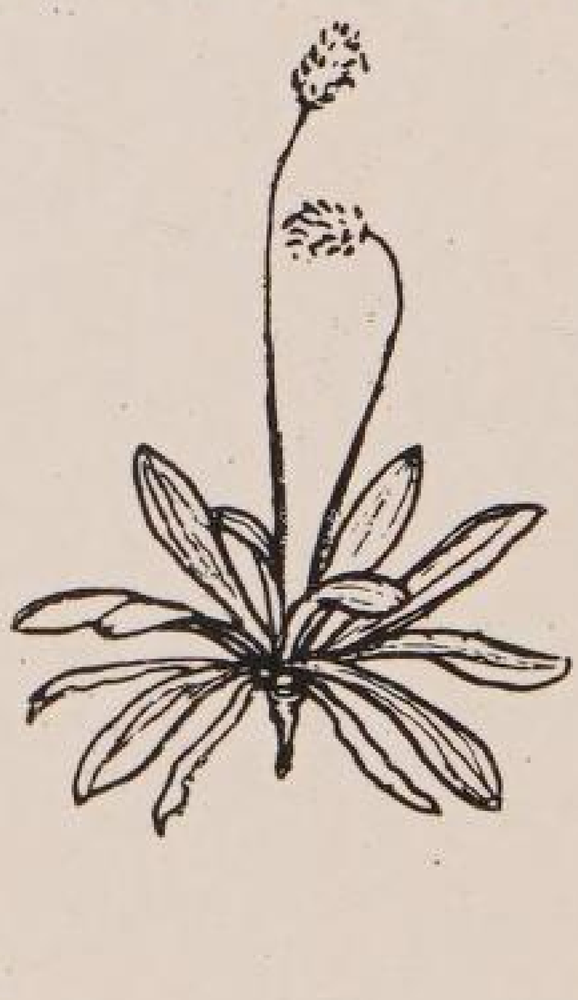
About the Book

This is a vivid and humorous account of Kripavikshu's stay, in 1954 as a boy of 20, in Brindavan. It is told with real story-telling skill, and gives a most entertaining and informative picture of life in Brindavan - how they live and how they love there, from a unusual point of view - that of a young, eager, rather naive spiritual seeker.

I feel sure it would give great enjoyment and profit to many, many readers not only in India, but in the rest of the world as well, where interest in all aspects of Indian life is so much on the increase.

In the hands of a clever director it would surely form the basis of a wounderful film, or a television series....

—A. M. Stuttle ('Mother India')



MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN IN BRINDAVAN

KRIPAVIKSHU ANIL MOHAN

H. K. PUBLISHERS AND DISTRIBUTORS
● Delhi ● Chandigarh

© Author,

ISBN 81-85318-55-7

First Published in 1991 by :

Head Office:

H.K. Publishers & Distributors
A-1/11 Shakti Nagar Extension,
Delhi 110 052.
Phones : 721 0979, 712 7025

Branch Office:

Shop No. 200 Sector 28-D
Chandigarh - 160002
Phones: 67124

Laser Typeset by:

Sterling Laser Arts
C-100 Shakti Nagar Extension,
Delhi 110 052.
Phones: 722 6129, 723 3929

Printed at :
Mehra Offset Press,
Chandi Mahal, Delhi

Foreword

By Sri M. P. Pandit

It is easy to dismiss the Indian reverence for *kshetras*, sacred spots on earth, as superstition. But the fact remains that each such place sanctified by the touch of the holy continues to exercise a strong fascination, even a pull, over large sections of humanity. That is because these sites still emanate the vibrations special to the personality that lived there at some time. Even places where saints and sages have lived carry something of their Presence. This is much more so with *kshetras*, where manifestations of the Divine have taken place.

They continue to exude the aroma of the Avatar. Of such spots in India, the Brindavan is perhaps the most celebrated. Even non - believers have confessed to a strange spell of something supernatural in its atmosphere. The very Name of Krishna strikes a different note on that soil. The very remembrance of Radha evokes a powerful feeling on that spot. The music of the waters of the Yamuna enchants the visitor !

Why is it so? Even if it is granted that Lord Krishna came on earth at some point of time in history, can the influence continue even after three thousand years and more? Sri Aurobindo speaks of an *ETERNAL BRINDAVAN* where the Lila goes on all the time. But that is obviously on some higher plane in our universe. Brindavan on earth is surely the physical focus of the original on a celestial plan.

The present narrative gives us a faithful picture of this holy land, the sacred environs, the variety of mankind that throngs there as to a magnet, the mischief of the simian inhabitants, the glory of the splendid peacocks, the majesty of the temple-towers, the good-humoured rivalry between the devotees of Lord Krishna and those of Radharani - symbol of surrender to Divine Love - the invigorating and purifying bath in the Yamuna, the trade of professionals in the pilgrim centre, the loud philanthropy of the patrons - all these features are portrayed by the author in words that bespeak of his unsophisticated being. He is convincing when he speaks of his experiences. What is most moving is his account of the Darshan of Radharani - not once but twice - at a high moment in his life and equally so when he describes how the Lord revealed himself to him in a rustic guise. Yes, miracles still happen in Brindavan. Prepare yourselves to participate in them.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram
July 15, 1991

Preface

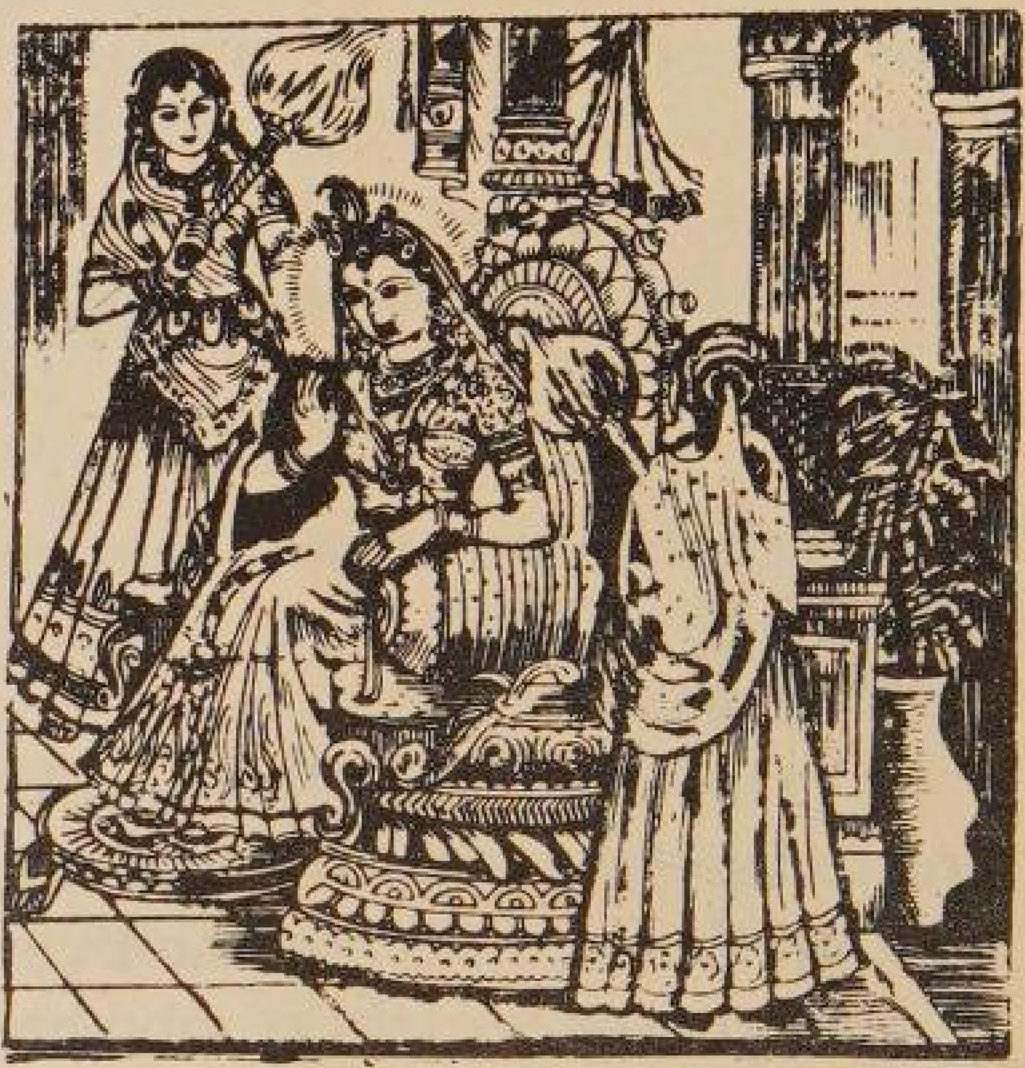
A respected holy man once remarked that of all the many places of pilgrimage in this ancient land, none could compare with Puri and Brindavan.

As for me, I can tell you only of Brindavan. Yes, that sacred land can still the mind and calm the being as no other place can. To walk on that soil, to breathe that special air, even today, brings back the presence of those who have done so before us. Rupa and Sanatana Goswami, the great Sri Chaitanya, and so many, many others came here; the whole of their existence, their very attainment, their eternal devotion..all of it remains there in that atmosphere. One can feel it in the very stone of the images in the temples.

Truly, Radha and Krishna are still at play! One feels their presence, their Grace, their Darshan, as in days gone by. This is the reason, I now know, that when I arrived there, I found myself crying out, "I have received something, something has been given to me!" These were the only words to express the feelings that came upon me.

Even long after I left there, the memory of their living presence, the feeling of what I had been given, would not leave me. and I could not restrain myself - in spite of laziness and the mental objections that arose within me,I was moved to write down what I had experienced, in each and every detail. I seemed to have no control over the pen, almost as if the atmosphere of Brindavan itself were moving my hand. Later there came the awareness that I was indeed writing a book, and once the whole story had been noted down, the urge to write completely left me - all was quiet and I knew that my work was finished. I only wondered, "Who will read this, and however will it be published?"

The very same day it was completed, I had a vision: The entrancing Radha was sitting in meditation between two friends, whowere fanning her with a Yak-tail fan. This was unlike any description of Radha I had ever come across..I had never imagined Radha without Krishna. I thought, "How arnazing! Why is Radha sitting alone like this?" It almost seemed as if she heard my question, moved slightly as if to sit more comfortably, then cast her full gaze at me and said: "I am happy with this narative about Brindavan. My blessing will be with your book." And she held up her right hand to bless me.



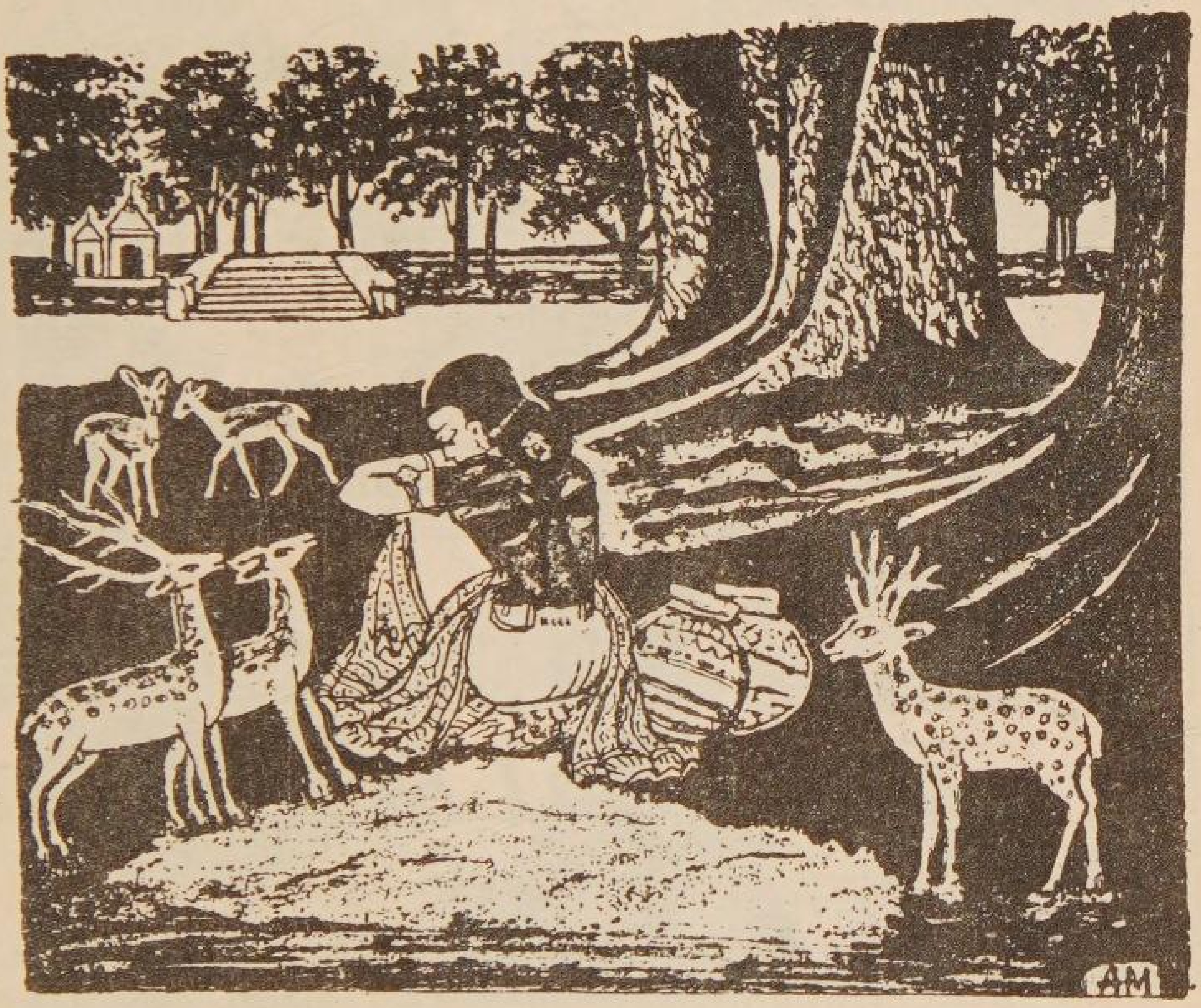
So, I ask you, dear reader, to go thorugh this account and decide whether these are mere fancies of the author, or whether you too feel the fascination of Radharani......

P. S.

But, please wait, for I haven't yet acknowledge a few debts: First, to my editor shraddhavan who took the trouble to edit and type the manuscript nicely. Second, to revered M. P. Pandit who had added a special value to this book by kindly agreeing to write a 'Foreword'. Third, to my paintaking friend Mr. S. P. Das who helped me in the matter of publishing this book. And last, though by no means the least, my dear publisher Mr. R. S. Bhalla who has taken the responsibility to reach this book in the hands of the reader.

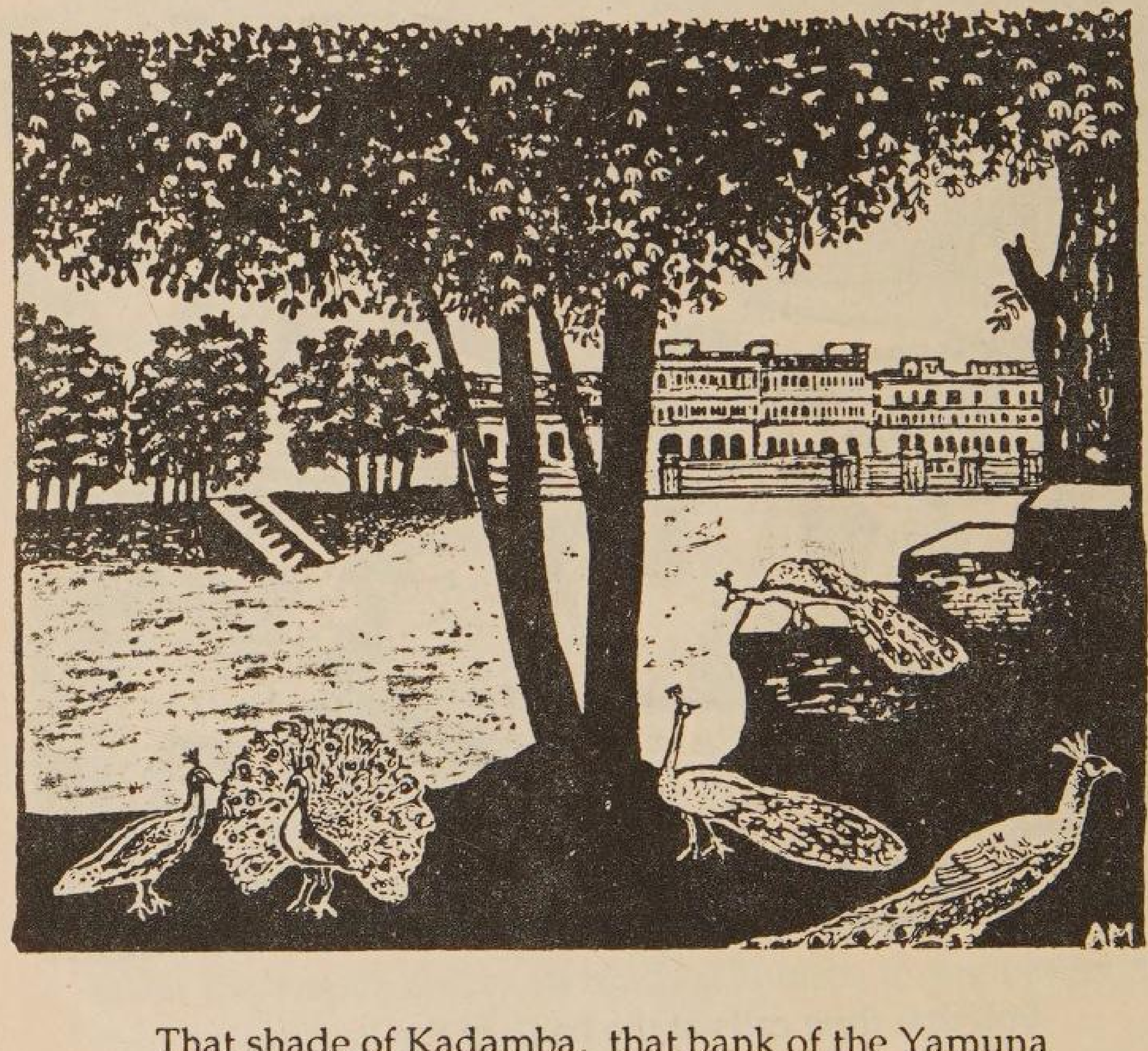
July 15, 1991

Kripauikshu Anil Mohan
Sri Aurobindo Ashram
Pondicherry-2



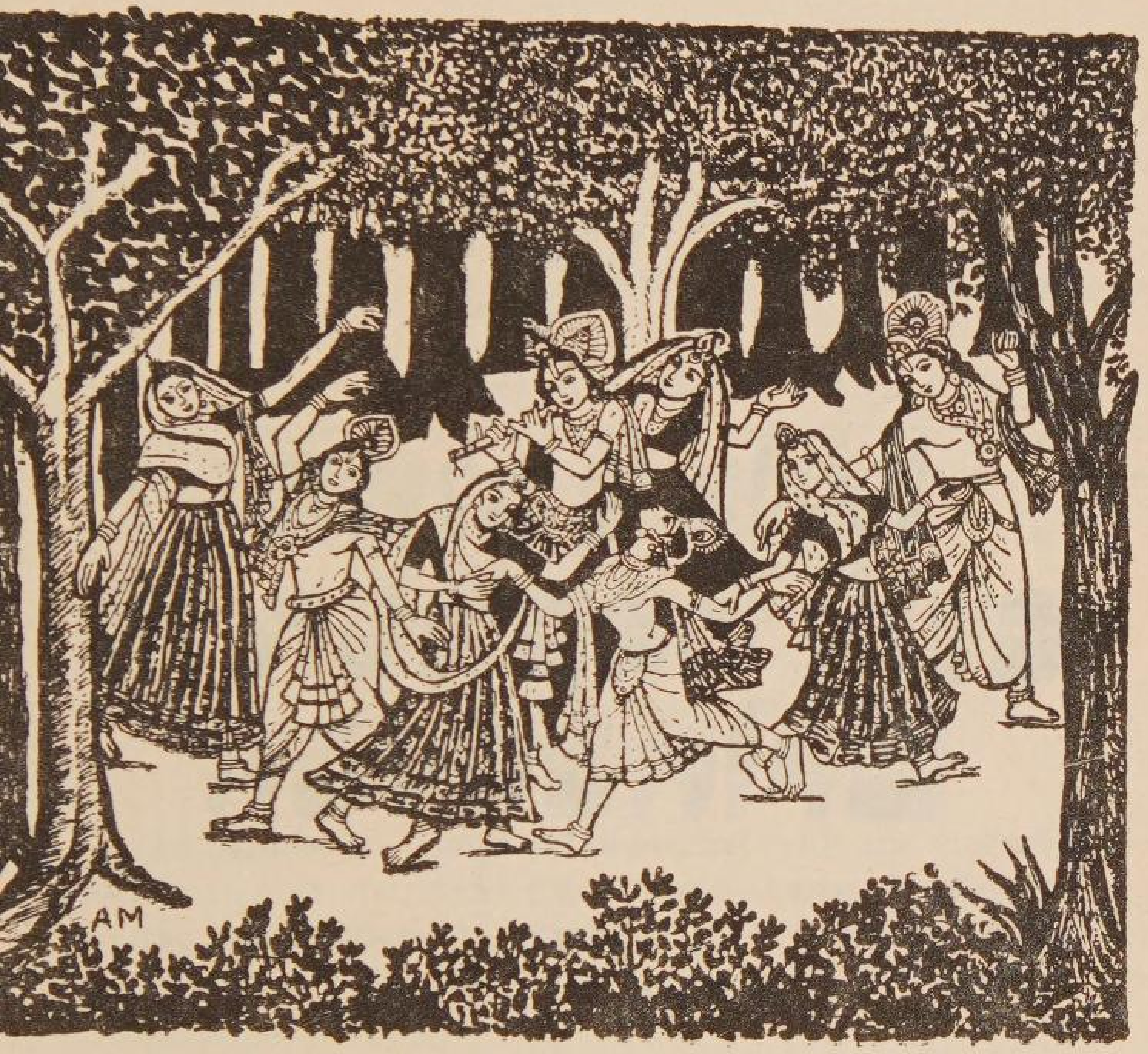
Still that flute calls at the bank of the Yamuna
Even now continues love's play,
All through the night and day,
Still Radha continues to weep in the core of the heart !

— Rabindranath Tagore



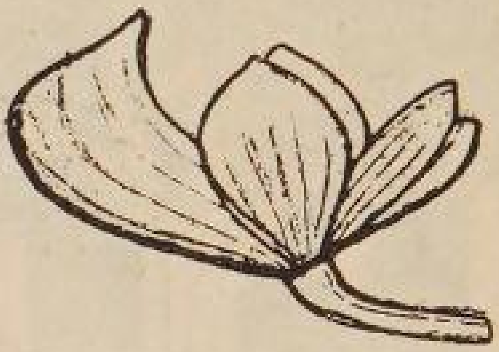
That shade of Kadamba, that bank of the Yamuna
That very dance of peacocks,
Even now pilfers the heart,
Still rainy night casts the shadow of separation!

— Rabindranath Tagore



Come then to Brindavan, soul of the joyous; faster and faster
Follow the dance I shall teach thee with Shyama
for slave and for master,—
Follow the notes of the flute with a soul aware and exulting,
Trample Delight that submits and crouch to a sweetness insulting,
Then shalt thou know what the dance meant,
fathom the song and the singer,
Hear behind thunder its rhymes, touched by lightning
thrill to his finger;
Brindavan's rustle shall understand and Yamuna's laughter,
Take thy place in the *Ras* and thy share of the ecstasy after.

— Sri Aurobindo



Miracles still happen in Brindavan

Chapter One

I don't recall who told me that Brindavan is a land of eternal error. There everyone seems to commit mistakes; even the gods are not exempt from this tendency - Sri Radha herself committed an error here, and everybody knows how she had to repent for it:

> "Oh friend! Why did I venture
> to the waters of the Yamuna?
>
> . . . .
>
> Had I known, I would never have gone
> under the Kadamba tree!"

To Brindavan - that land of eternal error and eternal love - I had finally arrived, and I too committed an error. But at first, of course, I could not even apprehend it. The moment I took my first step into the honey of Brindavan, I was lost to the everyday world, I was caught in its lure.

That first day, touching the sacred soil of Brindavan . . . I can easily recall that feeling of bliss - it is still within me, still vivid, still living!

I had just been released from Mathura Jail. As I was released that day, after a month's stay in that small cage, I felt such a special freedom, as if my soul were soaring through limitless horizons with extended wings. I had heard that there were six or seven miles between the two cities of Mathura and Brindavan, and I'm told that it's true. But I don't believe it even today, because not once but twice I walked that road, and never for a moment did I feel it was such a long distance; lost in wonder and bliss all the way, I could not gauge how far I had travelled - how could it be more than a mere mile and a half?

As I arrived on the outskirts of the town of Mathura, my strides stopped almost automatically at the sight of a secluded sweet-shop. My stomach was writhing with hunger-pangs: noon was almost past, and yet I had not taken even a drop of water that day. Not that I had no money with me, there were those two and a half rupees given to me by the jail authorities when I was being released; there was also the jailer's sweet assurance - "Come back here as soon as all your money is spent!" Yet I had been walking as fast as my legs would carry me, without stopping for food or rest, in dread that the police would apprehend me again and take me back by force even before my money was exhausted. To them, everything is possible, as I knew by experience. That was why I was so anxious to cross through Mathura as quickly as I could.

Anyway, the shop was almost empty: only a young man of my own age was sitting on a bench, taking tiffin. The shopkeeper's wife, seeing me pause, greeted me warmly as if I were an old relative. Inviting me inside, she motioned me to a chair and made me sit down. I understand that it is the habit of all shopkeepers to be gracious to every customer, but this woman's behaviour was something more than that. She gave me five chapattis with vegetable curry, a large spoonful of *rubb-ri* (a delicious milk sweet), and a glass of cool water, for only twenty-five paise. Now I ask you to tell me, where is this kind of food, served with so much love, obtainable at such a price?

I immersed myself in the task of eating it all. The other customer broke through my concentration, saying in my mother tongue, "You seem to be a Bengalee; where are you going?"

I was startled by his words: Oh God! Would I be arrested again? Was he a police spy? But the next moment I thought, "But he's speaking my own language, and his dress is even dirtier than mine - as if he too has just come out of jail!" So my fear left me and I found myself replying, "Oh Yes! I'm going to Brindavan. What about you?"

Immediately he said, "Come along, I'm going there too."

Now my wish had been to go to Brindavan alone, without any help or any company; yet seeing his eagerness, I could not turn him down. Besides, it was a relief to have a companion. For what might happen next? Well, let him come.

So we started off down the road again together.

I learned that his name was Kashiram; he was a Bengalee from Bihar. For three generations his family, emigrant Bengalees, had resided in the village of Amdoba in Bihar state. Kashiram had married at an early age and his parents, brother,sister were all still alive and living there.

I had often wondered if the whole world were not like me; were not all yearning to go and live in Brindavan? So I was curious about Kashiram's intentions - whether he too felt as I did. So I asked him:

"Kashiram, will you stay in Brindavan for ever, or will you go back to your village?"

"I won't go back unless my family come here and force me to go, "Kashiram said.

"But Kashiram, if you are going to allow them to take you back, then why are you on your way to Brindavan in the first place?" I asked.

He replied, "How can I not go back with them, if they come to get me? I left them out of anger, to get away from them."

"But there are so many places to go, why did you choose Brindavan?"

"Where else could I go? If I go to Calcutta, I will starve. But in Brindavan there are a lot of *chhatras*.[1] If I go to one of those, I am sure of a meal."

"I have also heard of these *chhatras* - but how did you come to know so much about this place?"

"Long ago I visited Brindavan with my family; and we have a family connection with a *Brajabasi*[2] there. What about you, do you know anyone in Brindavan?"

As he asked me this, I suddenly felt very alone, helpless and at a loss. I suddenly began to wonder, "Oh God! Really I don't have anyone to rely on - either in this far-away place or even in my own native village! It is true that I have come here with such high expectations and such a great urge for Brindavan - but where am I going to stay? How will my life be sustained there ' How will I survive? Look at Kashiram- how secure he is! He has a family and a devoted wife at home, and here in Brindavan he is acquainted with a *Brajabasi* !"

In an instant I felt surrounded by an atmosphere of helplessness, as if I were encircled by a shadow. Such loneliness! But then I caught hold of myself with surprise:

"How strange! How could I have forgotten so quickly Sri Aurobindo's message of consolation to me, just yesterday in jail! It was because of seeing him that I was able to come here with nothing, with no security. Then why do I expect to know anyone in Brindavan? Why have I suddenly become so sad and startled at the lack of missing family ? Why should I feel agony for want of relations at home? Why this sudden longing?"

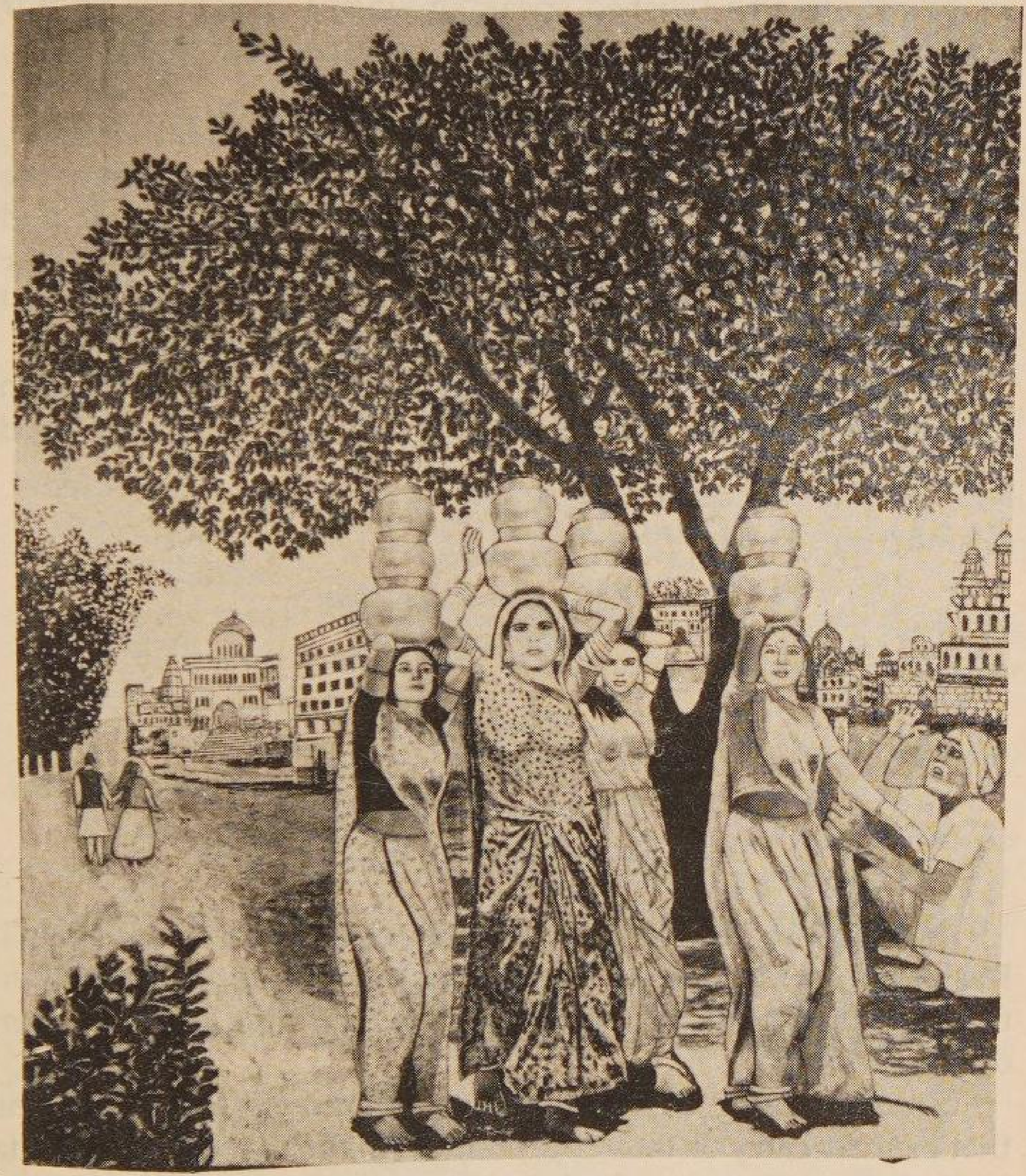
How this outside atmosphere had affected me! I hadn't realised how my mind must have been influenced by the depressing environment of the jail. Even full of self-pity I mournfully replied to Kashiram,

"No, brother, I have no one anywhere, neither in Brindavan nor in my place of birth. Listen, why are you addressing me so respectfully? I'm not your superior. Speak to me as your friend, as your equal."

Kashiram was quite intelligent and sensitive. He sensed my mood and responded very readily: "It will be, it will be so indeed. All this politeness will vanish once I become free with you. Now, look over there......there are hundreds of temple-spires over there! And look to the left: those are *Brajanganas*[3] they are all returning from wells with water-pots on their heads. We have arrived in Brindavan!"

"What? So soon we have arrived in Brindavan? How wonderful!" I was quite astounded by his words. "But how can this be Brindavan? It looks just like any other place - I don't understand. Where are those paths full of thorns that Radha endured on her way to that famous rendezvous with her Lover? And where is that grove of *tal-tomal-kadamba* trees under which Sri Krishna played his flute? Where are those enchanting deer and their does that roamed with such joy and abandon on that sacred ground? And the flock of peacocks with their hens, all set to dance, tail feathers spread out in full fan? What about the Yamuna river, with its water as dark as crows' eyes? Besides, we are on the same wide road, nicely paved, on which we have come from Mathura - how can this same road belong to Brindavan . . .?"

I was doubting all that I saw, yet from within I found myself calling out. "Jai Radhe-Shyam! Jai Brindavan!" And the next moment I prostrated myself on the ground, taking the sacred dust in my hands and spreading it on my face and arms.



"Hold on, brother, hold on! Take it easy!" urged Kashiram. "We haven't yet entered Brindavan. Come, you'll find what you're looking for when we get there."

"Then where did you see those Brajanganas? Where are they?" I asked.

"Oh, they're way up ahead, behind that grove of trees you see in the distance. Wait a bit, they should come into view again soon," Kashiram replied.

Hardly had he finished speaking when I saw three or four women far ahead, each carrying two or three pots on her head, one on top of the other. I said to him:

"You know, Kashiram, I saw this same sight in Mathura also, and at that moment too I said to myself, 'These are surely the Gopis of Brindavan! Here they are, still carrying their milk and buttermilk and going to meet their eternal Lover!' When I saw them, I immediately thought of Sri Krishna. Well, if Gopis still exist here, then Lord Krishna must also still exist somewhere!"

Kashiram said instantly, "Of course, he still exists - Radha and Krishna are still here today, here in Brindavan." And he recited this verse:

"Ajo se aprakrito leela
Kore Bānkā rai
Kono kono bhāggobān
Dekkhibare pāi!"

Even today
The miraculous play
Performs Banka Roy[4]
Some lucky ones can behold, ahoy!

I said to him, "But brother, will I be one of the lucky ones? Well, Kashiram, tell me, why do the Brajanganas carry their clay pots on their heads, instead of resting them on their hips as our women do?"

Kashiram said, "They can carry two or three, instead of the one that they can carry on their hip; besides Krishna's mother Yashoda carried them that way, and the women of this land have still maintained the custom."

"Have they such a reverence? They still hold to the custom of long ago in their practical everyday life!"

"Yes. They belong to Sri Krishna's land - that is how it has been possible for them. But you won't see here too such a scene much longer."

"Why not?"

Kashiram answered like a prudent man,

"How will you see it? Even here things are becoming modernised. Water is now supplied to each house by tubewells and water taps. People will no longer have to carry water painfully on their head from a distance. Then how will you see it?"

"That's true indeed, I see your point," I replied.

Still walking towards the far horizon, we become indrawn and went on in silence. Soon we came to a huge *Sirish* tree by the side of the road. Beneath it, a woman was taking water from a well to fill her earthen pot. She was dressed simply in a borderless white cloth - the dress of a widow. Her only adornment was a *tulsi* rosary around her neck and both arms, and on her nose was a *rasakali*.[5] I had seen such women in my home state without paying much attention; but suddenly, on seeing her, I felt as though she were Mother Yashoda, and I had the urge to take water from her hallowed hands.

And my throat had become parched with our long walk. As we neared the well, she spoke to me in a loving voice, as Mother Yashoda would have done:

"My son! Do you wish to drink water? Come, I will move my pot and draw water for you."

She was speaking in Bengali, and it was as if honey flowed in her words. As she began to move her pot for us, we both protested, "No, no - our thirst is not that strong! Do finish filling your pot first."

Her pot was nearly full, yet she went ahead and moved it to draw water for us. We drank the water - how wonderful it was! Afterwards she asked us,

"Are you coming from Bengal?"

"Yes, ma'am," we replied.

Smiling sweetly, without another word, she lifted her pot on to her head and began walking down the deeply shaded road. I asked my companion, "Are there many Bengalees around here? What is the local language?"

"In Brindavan," Kashiram replied, "Almost everyone speaks Bengali: the *Brajabasis* themselves speak it, and the Seth community[6] too know Bengali. When we get there it will almost seem as if we have returned to Bengal."

Thank God! At last I would be able to speak my mother tongue. Since leaving Calcutta I had hardly heard that sweet sound, and I had felt so much out of my element. What a relief! Being away from my own language had given me such a sense of isolation - something which cannot be understood unless experienced, unless one leaves one's native land.

Continuing down the road we came to a palatial building - two storeys high and occupying almost ten acres of land. In front of the gate was a crowd of sadhus, anchorites and beggars. It was such a sight that I stopped in my tracks to look in that direction.

"What do you see?" asked Kashiram. "This is called the Mirzapur *Dharmashala*.[7] You will not see another like it in Brindavan."

"Really?"

"Yes. Every day many sadhus and beggars are fed here and many pilgrims get shelter here. Would you like to stay here?"

"I'm not rich enough to stay in a place like this Dharmashala. But you go ahead if you can afford it." I said.

"Are you joking?" he replied. "I only have a few paise left in my pocket. I left my home suddenly, in a state of anger, bringing practically nothing with me."

At this, we both exclaimed in unison, "So what will happen to us now?"

Discussing as we walked, we soon reached the gate of the Bharat Sevashram - an ashram as well as a Dharmashala. Across the street from it was a betel-leaf shop where cigarettes and bidis were also sold. In front of the shop a man in an overcoat with a walking stick in his hand was talking to the shopkeeper. When he saw us he crossed over and asked,

"Would you like to stay at the Bharat Sevashram?"

"No sir thank you," I replied.

"Then where will you stay," he questioned.

I guessed that he must be a Panda Thakur - I mean, a pilgrimage agent. "If I have no plans," I thought "he may try to insist that I go with him." I was wondering what I should reply. In the nick of time the thought suddenly flashed into my mind, "Isn't Kashiram acquainted with a *Brajabasi* ?"

I asked my companion, "What's the name of your Brajabasi, brother?"

Kashiram asked the man, "Do you know Bepin Brajabasi?"

"Oh, you are going to Bepin Brajabasi's?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Aah! We just now finished chatting - if only you had come a moment earlier. . ."

Saying this, he pointed into the distance, "There, just see, there he is, still in sight." And he himself started calling to him. "Ho, Bepin brother, come here! Some clients here for you."

Hearing his name, Bepin Brajabasi turned around, taking a boiled sweet-potato from his coat pocket and munching on it as he approached.

"Where are the travellers?" he enquired.

Since we had neither bag nor beggage and no rickshaw was in sight, he had no way of determining who his new clients might be, until I folded my hands to greet him.

"Where do you come from?" he asked me.

Pointing to Kashiram I said, "He comes from Bihar and I am from Calcutta." And I pushed Kashiram into the foreground, whispering to him, "Come on, it's your turn to speak. He's your connection!"

As they spoke together I again mused over the whole turn of events. Poor Kashiram ! He had run away from home and didn't yet want to be found. He had planned to wait until his family had become really concerned about him - then he would reappear to their great relief and happiness, and all would be forgiven. There would be celebration and much attention would be bestowed on him ! But now the whole situation had taken a different turn: the very first thing in Brindavan, he meets a family connection. And since he is relating his whole story to Bepin Brajabasi, he will be found out in no time. This must be Radharani's doing....what is she up to?

Anyway it was decided that Bepin Brajabasi would shelter Kashiram and that a telegram would be sent to his family instructing them to send him a telegraph money order. Until the remittance arrived, he would stay with Bepin Brajabasi.

All this having been nicely worked out, the two of them took leave of me, walking away down the road side by side. So Kashiram had found shelter. The man who had introduced us to Bepin Brajabasi - his name was Bhavani Brajabasi - was still standing there. He showed concern about me, asking, "Babu, where will you go?"

I was in a fix. I had no place to go to. What should I say to him? I had planned that I would build a simple hut on the bank of the Yamuna, like Rupa and Sanatana Goswami, and would live on whatever rice and vegetable leaves happened to come to me at the end of the day; I would spend all my time visiting the revered Radha-Krishna - the idols of Lord Krishna and Radha in the various temples of Brindavan. It was with this inclination that I had come to Brindavan. But why should I tell all this to a stranger, just on the very moment of reaching there? Still, it was my habit to voice my thoughts frankly - I couldn't even create any other false answer in my mind; and how could I have lied to a Brajabasi of Brindavan? So I was considering what I should say to him.

Seeing me hesitate, he went on, "I have no guest house, and it is not my profession to receive pilgrims - in that case I would have taken you to my place. My job is only to bring travellers to the Bharat Sevashram. Would you like to go there with me?"

"No, sir. Thank you," I repeated.

"Then what will you do?" he asked again.

I was wondering the same thing when I suddenly remembered the name of another Brajabasi. Oh dear! If only I had remembered this Brajabasi's name earlier, Kashiram could have avoided contacting his family!

Anyway, I asked Bhavani Brajabasi, "Well, can you tell me the way to Madan Mohan Brajabasi's house?"

"Do you want to go there? Just follow this road straight ahead. It's a long way. After some time, just ask again for directions. If I didn't have other work to do, I would take you myself. . . "

"No, no, why should you have to go there? I've come all the way from Bengal by myself, I can surely find his home."

I saluted him with folded hands and started on my way. As I walked along I thought back to how I had come to know the name of Madan Mohan Brajabasi. In Allahabad, at the guest house of

Baturam Panda, I had met a Brajabasi whose job was to guide people to Brindavan. In the course of our conversation I had confided to him my heart's wish - to stay in Brindavan forever - but also that I had exhausted my funds. I asked him if something could not be arranged for someone in my circumstances. Though my encounter with him was brief, still he treated me very affectionately - it felt as though I had known him always; and I found him to be a Brajabasi not only in name but also in deeds.

"Why shouldn't there be a place in Brindavan for someone like you?" he said. "You should not worry at all. First go there and meet me, and then I will make all arrangements for you."

"But I don't know when I will reach there. At present I don't even have the train fare to go to Brindavan."

"Take your time, it does not matter," he said. "Upon your arrival go straight to Madan Mohan Brajabasi's house. All will be arranged there."

I was so filled with gratitude at his kindness towards a stranger that I wanted to express it somehow. My heart wanted to give him something. But I had nothing with me, what could I give? But wait, in my bag I had a few new books from my college. On an impulse I reached inside my bag and handed them to him.

"Will you take these books?" I asked.

He answered in amazement, "What shall I do with them?"

"No, I mean to say that I have no further use for these books and I have been looking for someone to accept them...."

Sensing how much I wanted to give him something, he replied, "Oh, I see; is that so? Then I will take them. And if I find someone to use them, I will give them to him; if not, I'll save them for you."

The following day the Brajabasi left Allahabad to return to Brindavan with a group of pilgrims. But that had been months ago, and because of the lapse of time I now felt very hesitant to renew the contact, for even I myself had forgotten the whole incident until today. Still, I set off towards his place, asking directions as I went - until I found myself in front of a large well-built house.

I walked through the gate and into a large room at the front of the house. It seemed to be an office. There was a big mattress spread out over the entire floor, with bolster pillows around the edges against the walls. There was a gentleman with a *tilak*[8] on his forehead, leaning on one pillow as he wrote, and another man opened a wall-cupboard and placed some huge record book from it in front of him. I went over to where he was sitting and asked,

"Is this Madan Mohan Brajabasi's house?"

Raising his head and peering out over the top of his spectacles to observe me, he answered, "Yes, sir, it is."

Before I could say anything more, he called someone and said to him, "Tell the master to come here." And to me he said, "Please take a seat."

Soon an old Brajabasi appeared, a white turban on his head and a white tilak on his forehead. Showing my regard to him, I explained why I had come and asked,

"Where is the Brajabasi from Allahabad? - I would like to see him again."

"He is not here now; but don't worry - we'll take care of you. He has discussed your case with me and I have already arranged work for you. . ."

Oh, the joy that I felt must have been visible! I said to the *Brajbasi*, "You have even arranged work for me? Radharani has so much compassion for me? But without knowing me and my background, how can you offer me a job?"

With a slight smile behind his thick moustache, the turbaned gentleman replied, "Whatever you have just told me corresponds with what is written in the front of your books, so more questions are not necessary. There is no reason not to believe you."

"Oh yes," I said, "I had forgotten about it. One of my relatives has a printing press and I myself printed all that biographical data at his press. It's fun to see one's name in print!"

Then the Brajabasi asked me, "Well, I see that the district is given, but which village do you come from? Many of my permanent clients are from that district."

No sooner had I told him the name of my village than he became quite enthusiastic and cried, "Excellent! You hail from that village? Then do you know Joykrishna Ghosh and Mrityunjoy Ghosh? Are Rasamoy Santra and Banamali Roy known to you? Just a few months ago all of them came here to my place!"

And he turned to his secretary saying, "Manager, please look in the record book once. I don't remember all the names...."

"Of course," I said, "how can I not know them? They are my neighbours. We live on one side of the village pond and they live on the other. They're our good friends also."

He became more and more enthusiastic, and asked me, "Do you also remember such and such names...?"

I mentioned one or two names of neighbouring countrymen who off and on visit sacred places. The Brajabasi became more and more jubilant: "Yes, yes, they also are my old pilgrims!"

On the spur of the moment I too mentioned many acquaintances to create confidence in his mind; but the next moment, my heart began palpitating with consternation: "Alas! What have I done! I have given vent to the names of my village, neighbours and everything!" My heart started pounding. "What a big mouth I have ! What if he sends a letter to my neighbours to verify the truth of my words?" .....And how clever the people of my locality are! Could they find no other place to stay when they came to Brindavan? Do they have to select the very house that I would come to? I am undone! They might come again at any time - if they see me they will say at once, 'Come back with us'. How strange, just when Radharani has blessed me with such a place to stay, this has to happen! Shall I be forced to leave this place, only because of these connections?"

And what a cruel twist of fate! For, meanwhile so many opportunities were coming to me one after the other:

"Now," the Brajabasi continued, "let us talk about our business: you will stay in my house. There is a good apartment in the pilgrims' house, you shall live there. If you wish to cook your own food, you may - you will be given all equipment for cooking. But if you would rather eat with us, you are most welcome. Clothing will be provided also. Your work will be to give lessons twice a day to my children. You will also go twice a day to the railway station to bring clients here for me. How does all of this sound?"

Hearing of this wonderful opportunity for living in Brindavan, I found it impossible to give him a direct answer in the negative. Instead of turning him down, I gave excuses,

"But I don't even speak Hindi - how can I teach your children their lessons? Teaching here cannot be imparted in Bengali as it is in our homeland!"

The Brajabasi said, "No, it is not. But this will be no problem. You will teach them only English and Mathematics. I have appointed other teachers who will teach Hindi and other subjects. So you will have no inconvenience."

How was I to make him understand that I had no inconvenience, how could there be any inconvenience in accepting this wonderful opportunity? I could not have imagined a more ideal situation. I had been prepared for any kind of job at all, even the worst. But I had never dreamed that I would be cast down as I was that day.

All were waiting for my answer. Fair and rosy-complexioned children of all sizes had gathered around their father. The Brajabasi's secretary and servants were also there, and all were waiting for my answer. And seeing all those expectant faces, I felt all the more helpless. O Lord! Were it not for all those old village connections, I could have been their tutor. What could have been more beautiful than a daily contact with those sweet children, and the privilege of daily contact with these sacred-souled Brajabasis.

But, alas, it was not to be !

I felt as if someone had taken the food right out of my mouth. All other inconveniences I could have borne - if only these people had no contact with my village. If I worked here, the whole of my village would learn of my whereabouts within two days ! If my mother and father had been alive, it would have been different. Yes, they would have been upset, but in the end they would have remained silent, allowing me to find my own way. But with my uncles it would be a different story. Their only concern was for the family reputation. They were sure to grab me and take me back by force to my village .

No ... impossible ! I could not let myself be caught like Kashiram.

Seeing me hesitate, the Brajabasi said, "OK, just think it over. You'll be here for some days, won't you ? When you decide, just let me know. And I want to reassure you in another matter : if you take this job, you will have no problems of money. I'll even provide pocket- money ..."

"Thank you, Sir," I said to that kind Brajabasi. "Let me think it over carefully. Once I take a job, I don't like to leave it."

As I was leaving the house, his men called me back inside.

"Perhaps you had better take your books with you", he said.

"All right. But only if you have no use for them." I replied.

And carrying the books, I stepped out once again into the streets of Brindavan. But in the meantime the sun was about to fade in the west.

Note and References

1. A chhatra is generally a charitable institution, or a place for distributing free food to the poor. In Brindavan food is distributed to pilgrims, monks, Vaishnavite saints and also to beggars.

2. Brajabasi means literally a man from Braja; and Braja is another name for

Brindavan. Brajabasis generally run guest-houses for pilgrims on a payment basis. They are also known as 'Pandas'.

3. Brajangana refers to all kinds of women of Brindanan....young or old, married or unmarried. But brajabasini refers only to the wife of Brajabasi.

4. Sri Krishna is known as 'the curved deity', because when he plays the flute he takes a curved pose; and when he plays at love affairs with his devotees, sometimes the nature of his play is also crooked. For this reason, some devotees call him 'the curved Deity' or 'Banka Roy', out of affection and love.

5. Ritual design in earth-pigments, used by Vashnava devotees.

6. Seth - a business caste.

7. Dharmashala: a rest house for pilgrims.

8. Tilak: ceremonial religious mark of sandalwood paste worn upon the forehead.

Chapter Two

As the sun faded in the west, the electric street lights of Brindavan came on and in the temples the bells of evening worship began ringing. Above, in the darkening sky, flocks of birds returned homewards, chirping a chorus of happiness as they flew.

Only I had no home to return to! Before, at least I had hoped to find shelter with Madan Mohan Brajabasi - but now even that hope had vanished. Perhaps I would have to spend this winter night on the street. Even before sun-down I had felt chilled to the bone... what would it be like late in the night? I had only my *dhoti, banian* (undershirt) and one cotton *chaddar* or shawl to keep me warm. At night time those light clothes would be useless against that bone-shaking cold of Brindavan. In the early afternoon I had seen many people in quilted clothing down to their feet - they wore socks, shoes, and even hats. Now I knew why! No wonder they were dressed that way.

But why should these things bother me? After all, I told myself, I have chosen this way of life - I must not mind these austerities; I can sleep on the street. But if the police find me and question me, what shall I say?

Meandering down the street like this, a bit absent-mindedly, I suddenly remembered Kashiram. Why not go to where he was staying? Perhaps that Brajabasi would let me stay the night also.

Turning around, I retraced my steps. By inquiring along the way, I reached Bepin Brajabasi's house. He wasn't there. Then, when I asked about the new traveller who had just arrived that day, a woman of the house immediately took me to a far side of the compound away from the main house.

Oh, I thought, this must be their guest-house. Going inside, I saw one shaky bare wooden bedstead standing against the opposite wall. Sitting on it and staring glumly out of the window was Kashiram.

Surprised to see me, he asked, "What's the matter? Why are you here, sir?".

"I came to see you because I couldn't find a room anywhere. But Kashiram, where is your guest-house? This looks like the stable!"

In truth, it was the stable. On one side of that long room two cows were tied; there was straw all over the floor, not to mention cow-dung. The cement floor had deteriorated, and had holes here and there; the walls were in a similar condition: in places rough bricks showed through - as if the walls were showing their teeth!

In an annoyed tone, Kashiram confirmed it: "Yes, just look, it is on better than a stable!"

"So?" I interrupted, "Stable or not - at least you have a shelter. Just look at me - I don't even have that!"

At this, all his pent-up anger burst out. "Don't mention the word shelter . . . the street would have been better than this!" Since I arrived I have been left completely by myself. No one has even inquired about me - and I'm feeling light-headed from hunger!".

"What?" I said, "They have not yet given you anything to eat? Perhaps it's just not time yet."

"Oh no!" he replied, "I'm sure they've already eaten. On the way here we even discussed food... I guess I didn't understand him: Brajabasi must have told me to take a meal at a chhatra - but you tell me where I shall find chhatra tonight, at such a late hour? They must all have closed by now!"

"Yes," I agreed, "they must have - so let's go and get our food somewhere. Tomorrow we'll see what can be done." I tried to console him.

I too was very hungry. Because of my worry about a shelter, I had forgotten my stomach; but now, speaking of food had brought on an urgent hunger. Proceeding forthwith to the nearest shop, we ate *roti* (unleavened bread) and vegetables.

Later, as we returned to his room, I requested him, "Let me stay here with you tonight . . . what else can I do? Tomorrow I'll look elsewhere for a lodging. If the Brajabasi comes, do ask his permission."

"Yes, you stay here," he said irritately, "and forget about the permission: he won't even bother to come and check on me!"

Kashiram was right. No one came to check on us. Too tired to worry about permission any more, my eyelids were drooping. Taking a gunny-bag that was on that bare bedstead, we lay down back to back, spreading the sack over us. But in spite of our exhaustion both of us woke up from time to time because of the intense cold. Gusts of chilly wind swept through wide gaps in the broken-down shutters of the window next to the bed.

But I think sleep is practicable even on a bed of ice, if one knows how to sleep. So even in that cold and on that bare wooden cot I did fall asleep unaware at some time.

Abruptly the sleep broke.

The night was not yet over, it was still dark. A separation was just beginning between the light above and the dark beneath. The slender pale moon still spread her fading light in one end of the sky.

Without waking Kashiram I quietly left the room - for what if I should be found sleeping there uninvited? Leaving the place I started loitering through the streets of Brindavan. Apart from one or two milkmen with their cows and calves, hardly a person was out in the street. That last faint glow of the moon, just before dawn, cast a mystic glow on wayside trees, very high mansions lining the streets, and the spires of temples raising their heads towards the sky, and thus made Brindavan honeyed and mysterious. As I experienced this special moment, joy arose within me and I sang:

"Wake up, Rai[1], wake up"
Sing those love-birds
"How much can you sleep, O Radha!
On the lap of the Black Gem?"[2]

And then with drowsy eyes, Radha and the Lord of Brindavan woke up - and as they awoke, so did the town. Trees and shrubs, rooms and streets, temples and bathing-places, all became lustrous with the golden glow of the morning sun. I splashed water from a street tap on to my face and then returned to Kashiram at the Brajabasi's house.

Kashiram was sitting in the courtyard of the house with the Brajabasi, basking in the morning sun. In last night's darkness I had not noticed the winter vegetables growing in a plot next to the courtyard - brinjals, okra (lady-fingers) onions, chillies etc. A man was digging the earth close to the roots and slackening it. Looking in that direction, the Brajabasi was saying to Kashiram in a most gentle voice :

"Look, young fellow, I am a poor man. My son has passed his M.A. after great hardship and he has just now procured a job at Mathura College. So how can I feed you? And how can I be sure that your family will send money? No one speaks the complete truth nowadays. How can I be sure what kind of mischief you may have done at home before running away here? It may be that they will not send money, and I shall have to suffer by spending for you. Still I can offer you at least the use of this humble room ....."

I went closer to them. The Brajabasi cast me a side glance, but it was as if he did not recognise me; he at once resumed his conversation with Kashiram.

I interrupted him, "Brajabasiji, please forgive me; last night I slept with Kashiram in your house without having asked your permission. When I came to find you, you were not at home..."

But it was as if this entered him by one ear and went out by the other. He made no response, but continued speaking to Kashiram:

"It's better if you take food elsewhere. We have so many chhatras - free food housed - here in Brindavan. Wherever you go you will get food. So where's the problem?"

Hearing the word 'chhatra' I asked him, "Sir, where are they?"

Immediately the old Brajabasi growled, "My God! Young man, do you expect to find them sitting down here? If you simply walk out the front gate your question will be answered immediately. After two footsteps you will see many chhatras - Calcutta Dharmasala, Mirzapur Dharmasala, Delhi Dharmasala, Atkhamba Dharmasala........from our gate you will see a crowd of sadhus, anchorites and beggars. If you follow them you will surely reach the place. Moreover there are lots of temples: Asta-sakhi's temple, Jamai Barik's temple, Lala Babu's temple - Wherever you go, you will get Radharani's prasad."

To cut him short and calm him down, I said, "Oh yes, we saw the Mirzapur Dharmasala yesterday, didn't we, Kashiram? And Kashiram knows of many others also. All right, now we are going."

And the Brajabasi at once agreed, "Yes, yes, do go! Hurry up! Otherwise there will be a great crowd for food."

And as we were leaving, he called out again, "Listen, listen, young man . . ."

"Who, me?" I couldn't believe he was calling to me!

"Yes, you," he said - "Until Kashiram's money comes, you can stay here with him. Otherwise he will be frightened alone at night."

So then I knew that the Brajabasi had indeed noticed everything and recognized me after all. I gladly consented to stay, and off we went to search of chhatras.

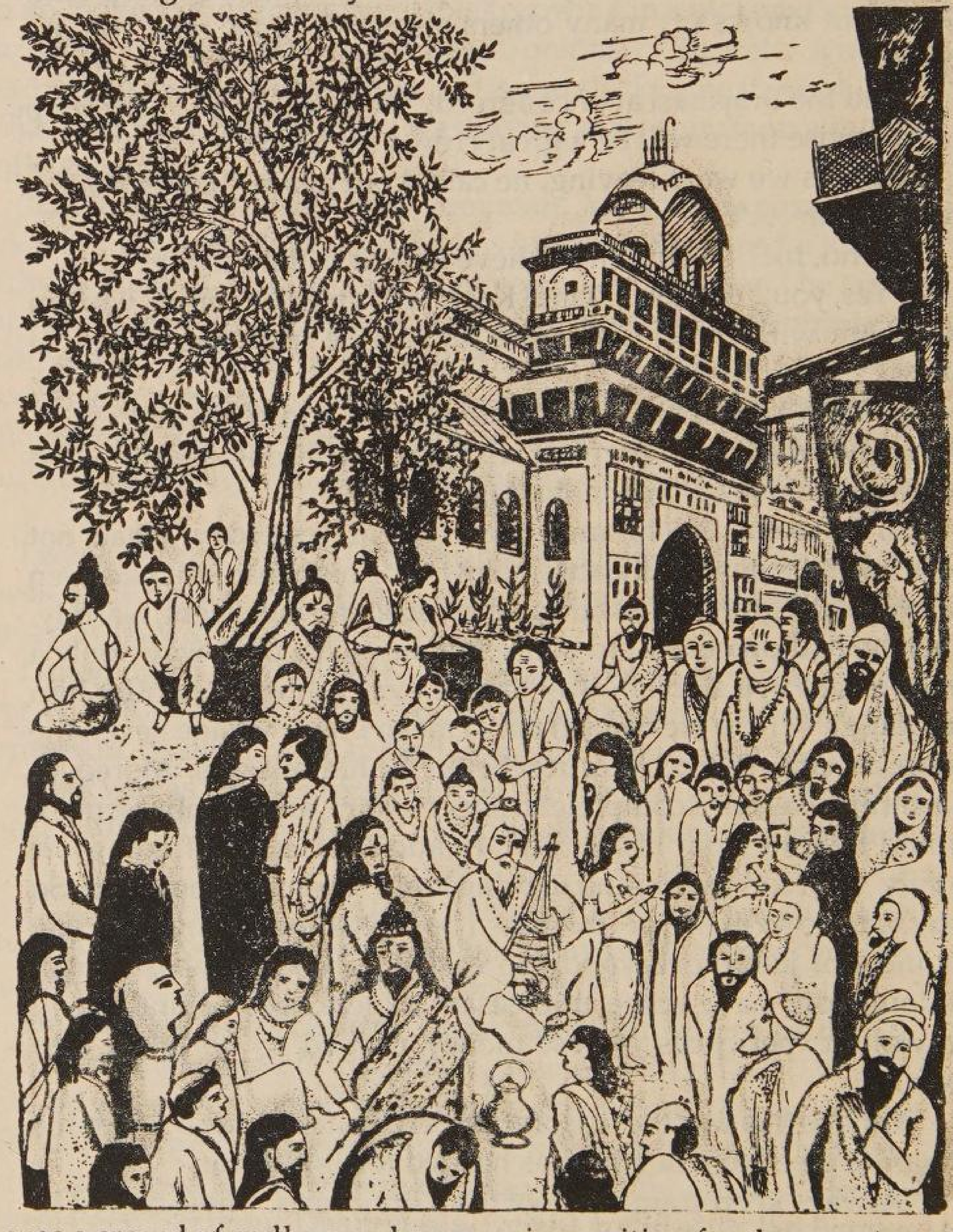
Since seeing Kashiram's predicament yesterday, I had not been happy with this Brajabasi. How rude his behaviour had been. First he had greeted Kashiram, the son of a former client, warmly. Then he had proceeded to house him in such a poor way - only a wooden cot in a stable! Why had he even bothered to offer him anything? Where we come from - I mean in our village - even the poorest man will feed his guest before he himself eats. Moreover Kashiram was not a complete stranger to him, and reimbursement would be sent from his family. In addition to this, finding the family's lost son was bound to bring him a reward of some sort. So why was he so miserly? But now I began to understand that one should not judge everybody so easily. These Brajabasis must undoubtedly have some unpleasant experiences behind them. Previous experiences of lost money needed to be taken into account.

Perhaps this was the reason why Sri Chaitanyadev advised his favourite disciple when he was headed for Brindavan :

"Always keep yourself aloof from Brajabasis. Show regard to them inwardly and outwardly. Do not question any of their behaviour . . ." and much more such advice.

But it was my misfortune that I had not heard these words till then. Nobody had taught me to keep aloof from Brajabasis. Rather, I came into more and more contact with them.

Anyway, we did not need to go far in search of food. We soon found a large chhatra by the roadside. Outside its closed doors



was a crowd of sadhus and sannyasins waiting for the opening of the door. There were ochre-robed monks with matted hair holding large iron pincers and their famous *kamandalu*;[4] there were Vaishnava sadhus wrapped in shawls printed with the many names of Krishna, holding their one-stringed *ektaras*[5], and there were ascetics with wodden staffs as well. Alongside them were beggars, orphans and the sick - all sitting and standing on the verandah of the chhatra, the corridor of the Neighbouring house, and under nearby shade-trees.

I knew that if we stood in line with them, we would also get Radharani's prasad. But it bothered me to think of eating that free food while I still had a couple of rupees left in the fold of my cloth. Should one accept Radharani's gift unless everything is spent and one is really needy? Therefore I said to Kashiram, "Come, let's take a walk and visit other chhatras."

But Kashiram did not agree. He was more experienced in this matter than I was. He said to me privately, "No, let's wait in this line. I tell you that you will get no meal in any chhatra if you are late. There is a fixed time-limit for food-distribution in all chhatras. If the time is past, the owner will close the door. After that, no amount of pleading will produce even a grain of rice. It's better to remain here."

Seeing that he wouldn't budge, I was about to tell him the real reason that I wanted to leave - that money in my possession. But the people around us were gazing at us. I felt their resentment at having to share their food with two more stomachs. So I took Karshiram aside and showed him the little money I had left in the fold of my cloth :

"Look, I still have money. Is it right to eat in a chhatra while I still have coins? Let's see how long this lasts. When this is gone, then we can use the chhatras. Come on, let us rather go together, to get to know all the chhatras, and then we'll come back."

Kashiram accepted my logic. He came along with me, though not enthusiastically. Although we did not eat in any chhatra, we moved about and saw all the chhatras that day. It was a joy to me to see so many chhatras and so many arrangements for free food. I said to myself,

"Why did I ever worry about food, coming to Brindavan? Radharani has made so many arrangements for meals all around here. Now I see how useless all my worry was. Seeing all these places, thoughts like a miser's appear : 'No, I don't want to eat in any chhatra - let my heart be filled with the joy of security knowing that Radharani's chhatras exist is enough for me. Whenever I choose, I shall be able to get food here instantly'."

So we went on through Brindavan. As we roamed here and there, the sky suddenly became overcast, and rain began to fall. But it was neither a strong rain, nor the kind that kindles romance in the hearts of lovers. It was an insistent winter rain which continued to drop slowly all day long. The streets became muddy, and as we had no change of clothes, we cut short our tour of discovery. Taking refuge from the downpour in a nearby Radha-Krishna temple, we got the opportunity to have their Darshan. Then, selecting a small shop, we two took breakfast and lunch simultaneously - *puri* (Wheat cake fried in oil), pulse, and an indigenous treacle resembling what we call *'veli'*. Then we returned to the Brajabasi's house.

The very next day Kashiram's money arrived from his village, in care of the Brajabasi. The two of them went together to the Post Office to collect it. Then Kashiram left for his village to resume his life there.

Having said goodbye to Kashiram, I too left the Brajabasi's house, for with the departure of my travelling companion, I lost my place of lodging; so I required a shelter again before anything else.

Yes, a shelter was required. This necessity for a refuge, I felt in the inmost core of my heart. I did not want to become a traveller-monk and take up a gypsy way of life. I did not want to stay every night under a new tree, leaving the previous one.[6] I had realised delight in the depth of my heart, so I derived no happiness from travelling. I yearned to sit silently in one place. The arrangement for meals in chhatras had been made. Now a reliable refuge was required, I thought to myself.

Wandering here and there, I again came to the Bharat Sevashram. And across the street from its entrance, I again spotted Bhavani Brajabasi, standing as before in front of the same shop.

Recognising me, he asked, "Where have you been? I haven't seen you since our first meeting."

"I was staying at Bepin Brajabasi's house with my friend; but today he has left town, so I am again without a shelter. Do you know of any place where I might find lodging in exhange for work?"

Pointing to the Bharat Sevashram across the street he said, "Why? Such an Ashram is just here. Why not go there?"

"Shall I? Do you know whether something will be done for me if I go in?"

"I'm not sure, but why not try? The Swamiji[7] is sitting just there inside the entrance. You can ask him."

With this encouragement, and a prayer under my breath, I entered the main gate.

There was large compound surrounded by a high wall. On one side construction was in progress : many labourers - men, women and children as well - were working noisily. The Swamiji sat in front of them, supervising. I went and stood before him and did pranam to him.

The Swamiji looked at me intently and asked, "What do you want?"

"I have been in Brindavan for the last few days, and have just spent my last rupee. Can you arrange to give me shelter in exchange for work?"

"Where are you from, and why have you come to Brindavan?" he asked.

"I am from West Bengal, but I was bounced from place to place getting here and my story is a long one. Do you have time to hear a lengthy tale?"

The Swamiji re-adjusted himself, sitting up straight in his chair, and said, "Yes, yes, come and tell me."

It was such a relief for me to find someone at last willing to hear me out, that I found myself almost at a loss for words. He helped me to begin by asking,

"Where were you obstructed on your journey?"

"Oh Yes, for a month I was in Mathura Jail", I answered.

"What? you were in jail !" He was alarmed. "What had you done? Had you stolen something, or were you in a fight?"

"No, neither. I was there due to my own stupidity."

"For stupidity alone you went to jail?"

"Yes sir," I replied. "It was simply my own foolishness. My mother was my sole support in this world, and following her death I could no longer bear to stay at home. I travelled to Gaya to complete her last rites. After they were over, I resolved to come to Brindavan. Now if I had sold my ancestral property I could have lived comfortably here. But so great was my apprehension of my relatives that I did not dare to sell it. In fact, I didn't even tell them that I was leaving town. Taking just enough money for the rites and the journey, I ran away. Now I ask you, wasn't that rather foolish of me?"

Not answering my question, he said, "But you haven't told me how you ended up in jail."

"Oh yes! That part comes next,". I replied. "From Howrah Station I came under the influence of a guide. He encouraged a Panda in Gaya to charge me three times the normal rates, which he proceeded to do. If I had not been cheated, there would have been enough money for train fare for the whole trip. And on top of all that, the guide himself charged me extra. After meeting his demands and paying to stay with them in Kashi for two days, my purse fell short by ten or fifteen rupees of the fare to Brindavan. As it was, there was only enough for a ticket to Prayag (Allahabad). So what could I do? From Prayag onwards I rode the train without a ticket, and in Agra I was caught; from there I was taken to Mathura Jail."

Hearing this, the Swamiji murmured, "Hum! Then, what's next?"

"There's nothing next, and that's my story. Don't you believe me?"

"And what if I don't believe you?" he said.

"Well, I have no proof... except... well, there is a man in Prayag, a Brajabasi from Brindavan - he can speak on my behalf. I had left these books with him, but since they were of no use to him he returned them to me at the time of my departure. He brings pilgrims here for Madan Mohan Brajabasi. He knew me in Allahabad and will vouch for me."

"Are those your college books?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Take them, if you like. Perhaps you'll find a good use for them. Although they are meant only for Calcutta University students, they can be use to any scholar. Look, here are Shakespeare, Tagore, Michael Madhusudhan... and Deductive-Inductive Logic, and some history books as well..."

Ignoring all these details, he said, "All right, all right. But tell me, why aren't you wearing a shirt? You have only a banian on your body."

Feeling too embarassed to tell him I had given it away in Allahabad, I only said, "I left it behind because I was headed for Brindavan, and after all, of what use are clothes here?"

The Swamiji laughed heartily, commenting aside, "Mad, really mad! He says, 'what use are clothes here?'... So, in Brindavan you will wear the bark of trees, you will drink river water, take food only from Nature and sleep only in mountain caves - right? So in that case, why did you come to the Bharat Sevashram for shelter? Why not a mountain cave?"

Immediately in front of us, the masons were working. When the Swamiji burst out laughing, they too began to laugh, and then dropped their work and came over to listen.

I said, "You've caught me, all right. I've been so blinded by my passions that I thought I needed nothing else to survive. Even the little money I had with me I almost spent in Gaya."

"Yes," he said. "It happens that way. The younger generation has no practical sense of things. Do you think that this outer renunciation brings you into contact with the Divine overnight? If putting on a loin-cloth and leaving home accomplished that goal, then everyone would do it!"

Though he was laughing at me, I could feel in my heart his compassion flowing towards me. And at that moment, in spite of everything, I felt absolutely secure inside. I knew I could rely on him - the Swamiji had mercy on me. I did not even notice the moment when he discarded ordinary address and started 'thou-theeing' me, and began to joke as if we had long been intimate. Swamiji's laugh, coupled with his gentle reprimands and sting of mockery, gave me a kind of shudder of delight.

Then he quietly asked me,

"Well, have you been initiated anywhere?"

If the time and person had been different I would not have replied to this question, for I could not express those secret things then to just anybody. But somehow I felt like being very open with him. And if I had said nothing, he might have wished to initiate me himself and mould me to his ways. Of course this would have assured me of a place to stay, but it would be under false pretences. I would not have felt at all comfortable staying with him when I knew so well that I could never be his disciple. Therefore, whatever mght be the affliction and inconvenience, I had to speak out frankly on these matters.

I clearly told him,

"Yes, sir. I am initiated into Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. It is by his Grace alone that I have been accepted."

Then I told him of the vision I had had that last day in Mathura Jail, adding,

"Because of this I can accept no other path. But if you give me shelter, I will be grateful to you and do as you say."

At that time I was not aware of how most teachers would have reacted to such a request, but in retrospect I see how selfless and kind the Swamiji was towards me!

"Then why did you come here?" was all he said to me in a tone of remonstrance. "Why have you not gone to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry? That Ashram would be very suitable for you."

"Swamiji, I have spared no pains for that. Only I did not know how to make a connection with the Mother of the Ashram. I have been asking many people for a long time to escort me to the Ashram and arrange for my accommodation, but no effect. Then, just a few months ago, some people from my village went there and came back saying that the Ashram would not be accepting new people for the next few years. But after the demise of my mother, I was not able to remain for even two or three days at home. It is for that reason that I felt the urge to come to Sri Krishna's land."

As he seemed to have no further comment, I continued,

"I hope you are not offended that I connot become your disciple. You have many people here who serve you - the cook, the servants, those masons over there....they are no disciples, are they? Why not keep me in the same way as you keep them? You will find in my work a whole-hearted sincerity, even in the smallest details."

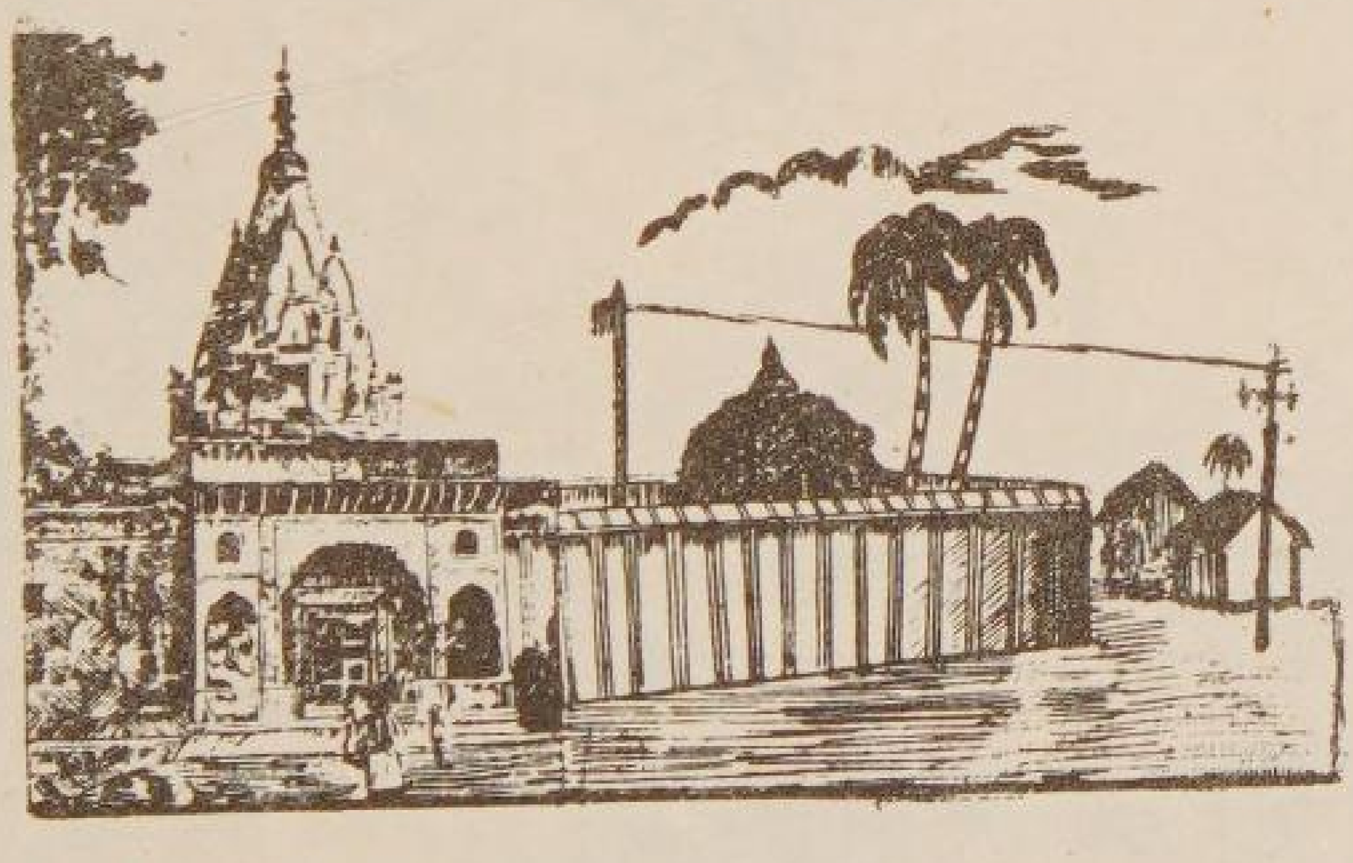
Hearing me out, the Swamiji uttered a serious "Hmmmn." And after a lapse of silence he said, "All right, we'll give you a chance. See if you can live here."

Then, standing up, he took me towards a two-storeyed building. In a corner room there I was introduced to another Swamiji, whom I later learned was the head Swamiji of this Ashram in Brindavan. The first Swamiji I had met was in charge of a Sevashram in Gaya, but had come here along with one of his disciples to oversee the construction work which I had seen in progress. Consequently, the matter of accommodating me was undoubtedly dependent on the agreement of the Swamiji of Brindavan. But he too gave his approval, on the recommendation of the Swamiji of Gaya.

Then the Swamiji called a young disciple, a *Brahmachari*,[2] and said,

"Brahmachari, do arrange to accomodate him in a room on the first floor of this building."

So my accommodation in the Bharat Sevashram was officially arranged.



Note and Raferences

1. Radha is called by the devotees 'Rai'.

2. Sri Krishna is called 'Black Gem', for his complexion is dark green, so nearly

black; and among deities, who is more accomplished than Sri Krishna? So naturally he is Black Gem indeed!

3. Prasad means food offered to the deity, and afterwards distributed among the devotees and bystanders.

4. Distinctively-shaped vessel containing holy water.

5. A simple musical instrument.

6. There is a strict rule for an ascetic, that he should not spend the night twice under the same tree - because if he lives many days under one tree, he will develop an attachment to that particular tree.

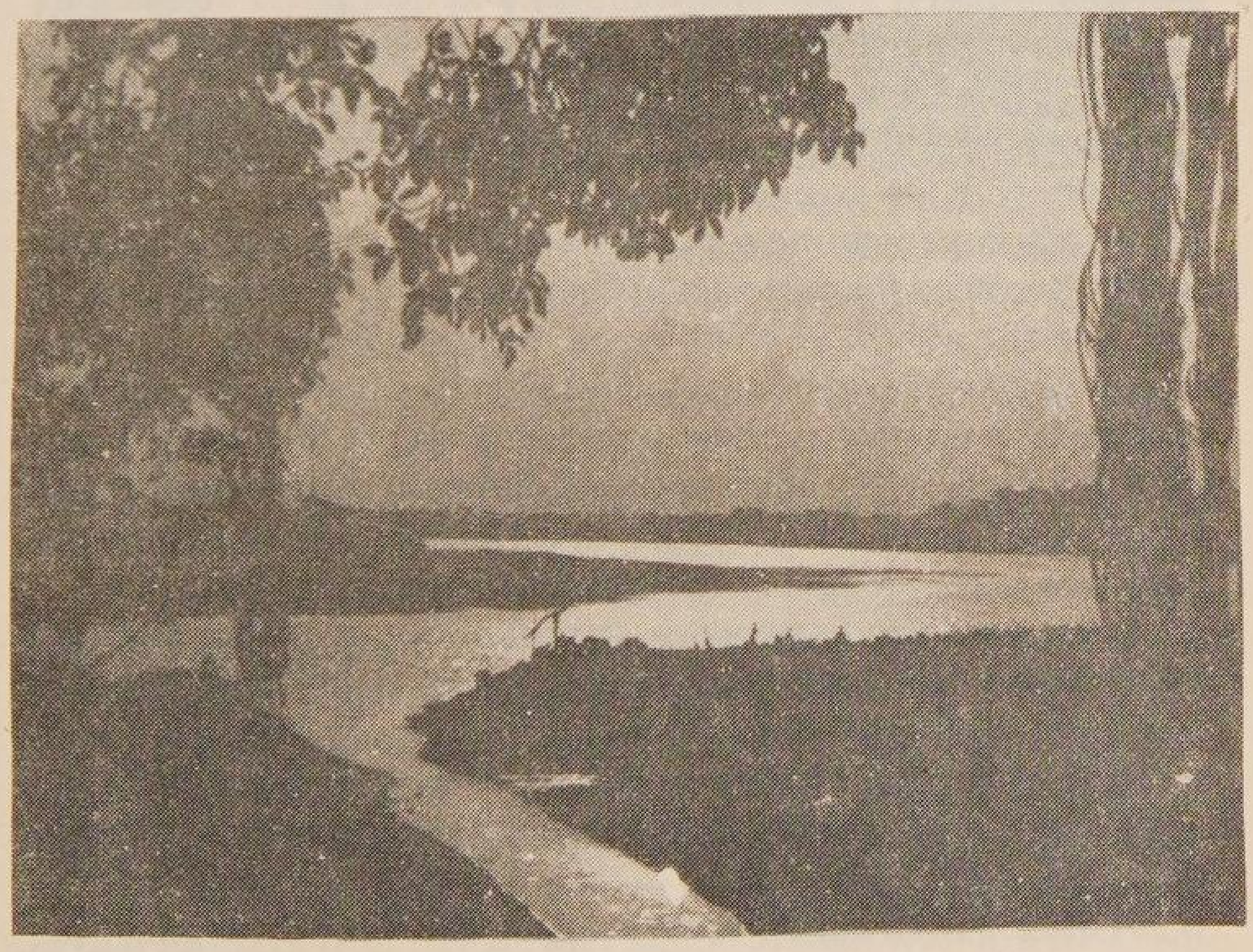
7. The chief monk of an Ashram.

8. Brahmachari means a celibate, a religious student; but in this case the Brahmachari was also a disciple of the Swamiji - after completing his period of celibate study he himself would become a Swamiji.

Chapter Three

The Swamiji's disciple, the Brahmachari, accompanied me to the first floor of the old two-storeyed building. There he opened a door, saying, "This is your room. Put down your belongings and take a little rest. I will come back soon."

It was a room used for the Sevashram's pilgrims - spacious, with large windows and doors on two sides and a comfortable verandah as an entry. There were recessed shelves in the walls, but the only piece of furniture was one large cot. I placed my book-bag on the cot and began exploring my new surroundings.



As I looked out of each of the windows, I beheld such beauty that I could not keep myself from staring. Behind this house was the railway station, and just beyond that came the market; but on beyond that as far as the eye could see were only temples and more temples. Then out of the front window was an exquisite scene: through dense groves of deep green trees, the Jamuna river was gently meandering, winding, almost as if its very course were determined by the gentle breeze.

Oblivious to the passing of time, I was surprised to find that the Brahmachari had returned. He told me,

"Our dinner is almost ready. Go down and take your bath now."

"What is the procedure?" I asked. "Is there tap-water?"

"Yes, there's tap-water, and if it isn't running, there's well-water too."

"But don't you bathe in the Yamuna?"

"Oh no," he said, "It's quite far from here and takes a lot of time. But if you wish, go right ahead."

"Yes, brother, I really would like to do that. I've been in Brindavan for two days now, and I haven't even seen the river yet - nor have I had a bath all these days!"

I did not need to say any more. The Brahmachari replied,

"Very well, do go and bathe there."

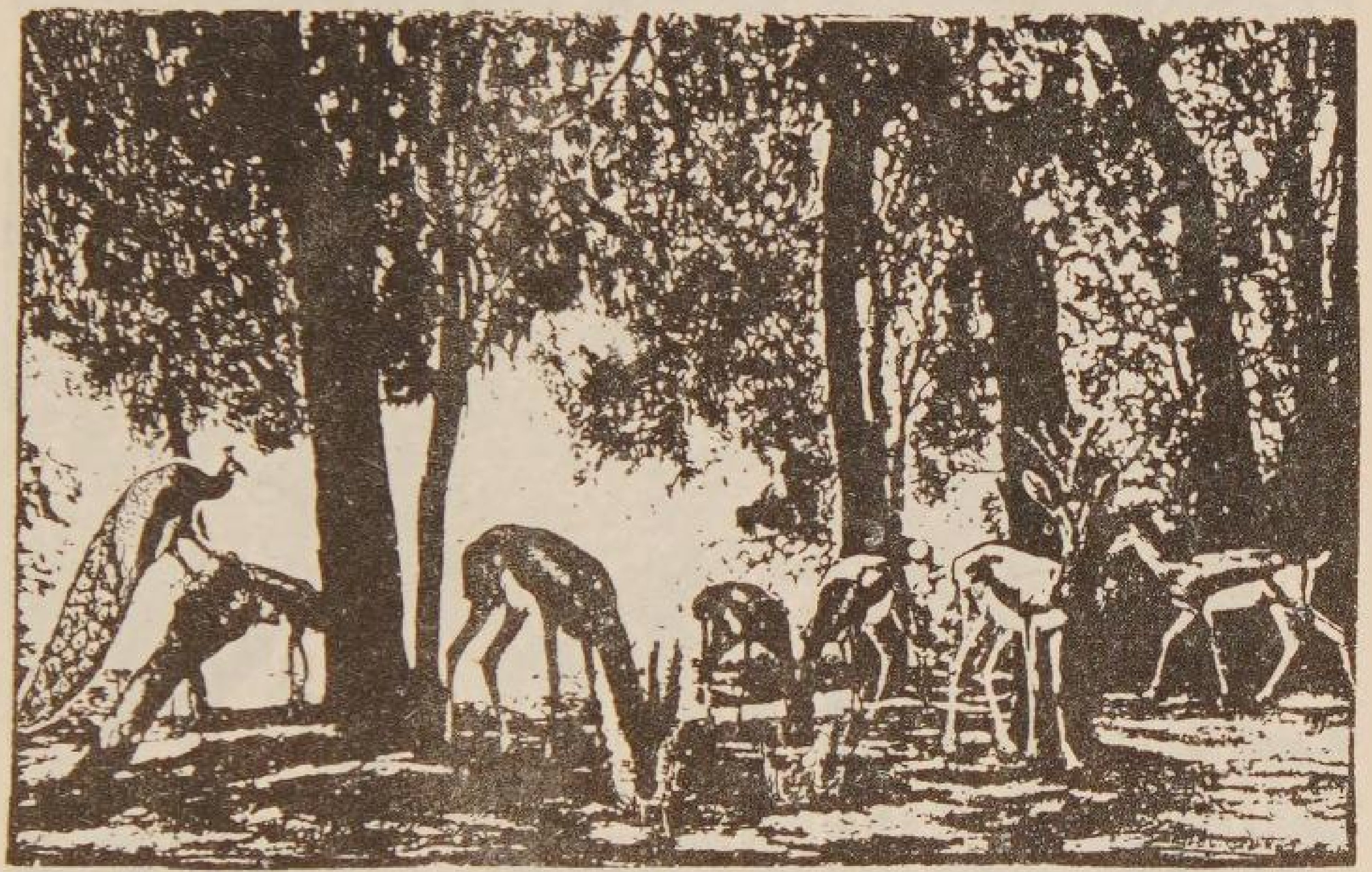
He accompanied me for a short distance, and then stopped, saying, "No need for me to go further with you. If you follow this road straight ahead, you will reach the river bank."

And indeed it was better that he left me to myself. Had he been with me I would not have been able to experience that water to my satisfaction; for with another present, how could I have immersed myself with the genuine devotion that I felt, and would there have been such a unique sense of enjoyment afterwards?

In fact that day I saw a new aspect of Brindavan. The two other days I had seen only houses, palatial buildings, roads, monasteries, temples and chhatras. But That day I witnessed the real Brindavan: the Brindavan which is the play-land of Radha and Krishna, that existed hundreds - or rather, thousands - of years ago!

A brick path meandered in a zigzag course to the bank of the

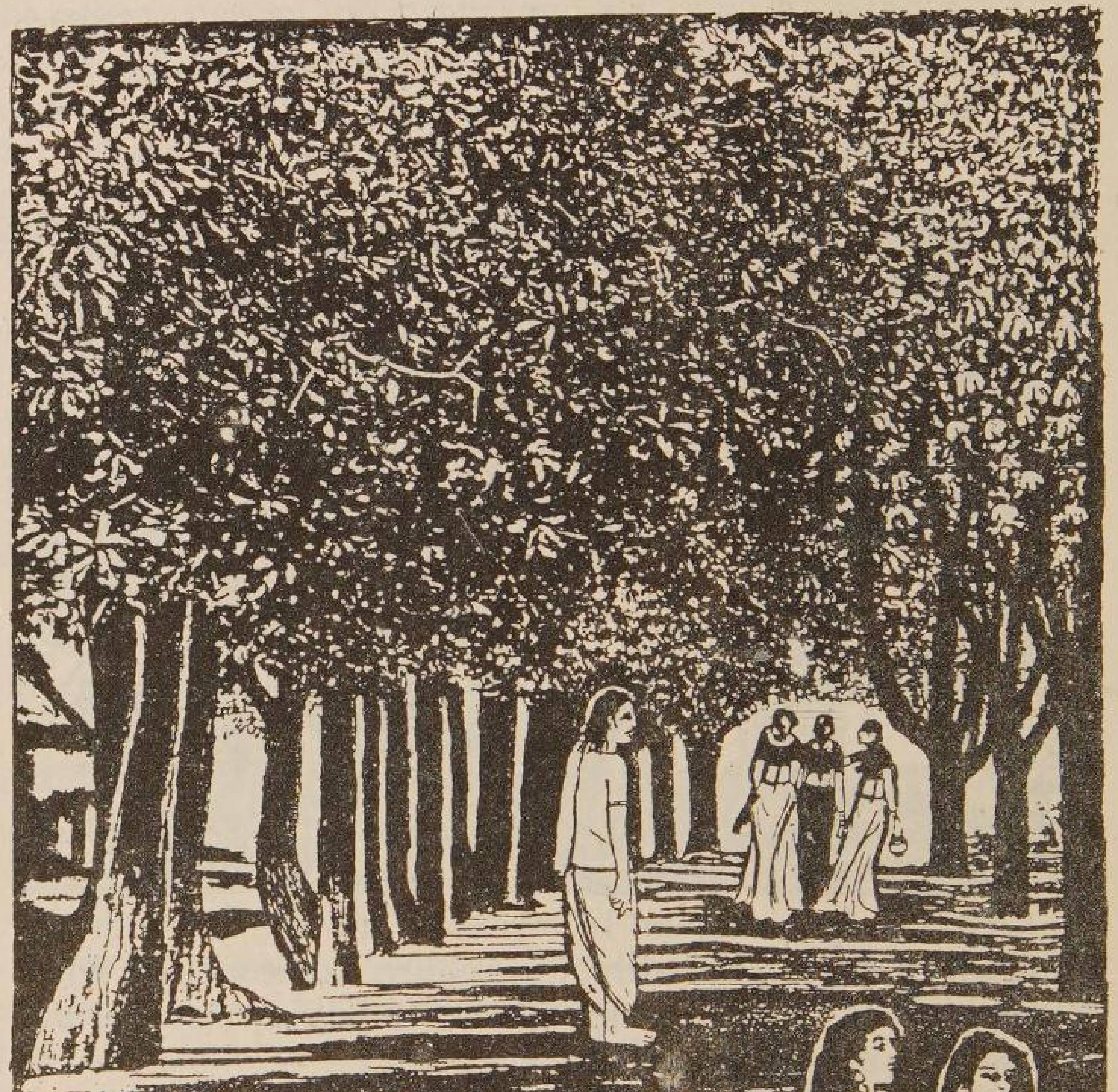
Yamuna. Both sides of the path were lined with Bokul and Deodar trees. Quite close to the path but almost hidden from view, I caught glimpses of a peaceful and solitary ashram beyond dense undergrowth....there were huts of sannyasis surrounded by a wall. Both inside the ashram courtyard and outside in the Kadamba-tree groves, flocks of peacocks were roaming freely.



I felt a deep sensation in my heart and it filled with joy, pounding at this sight of incredible beauty. Someone as if whispered in my ear, "Just see, this is the very Brindavan that you have been seeking in your mind!"

I recalled that by this same path the Gopis had gone to the Yamuna for water; Sri Krishna had gone with his friends along this lane to reach the pastures. In each and every grain of sand I could feel the very touch of their divine feet!

As I walked along, deeply absorbed in the Brindavan of old, I was suddenly startled by a fluttering noise very close to my head. A flight of parrots streaked by, their wings almost grazing my ear! I followed their flight with my gaze until they landed in a guava orchard for a free meal. Actually it was a forest more than an orchard - it extended as far as the eye could see on both sides of the path, as far as the river; it must have been twenty-five acres in all. In that forest of fruit trees, every single branch was bowed down with the weight of ripe fruit, and the air was rich with the sweet scent of guavas. Seeing this unguarded abundance of fruit, I



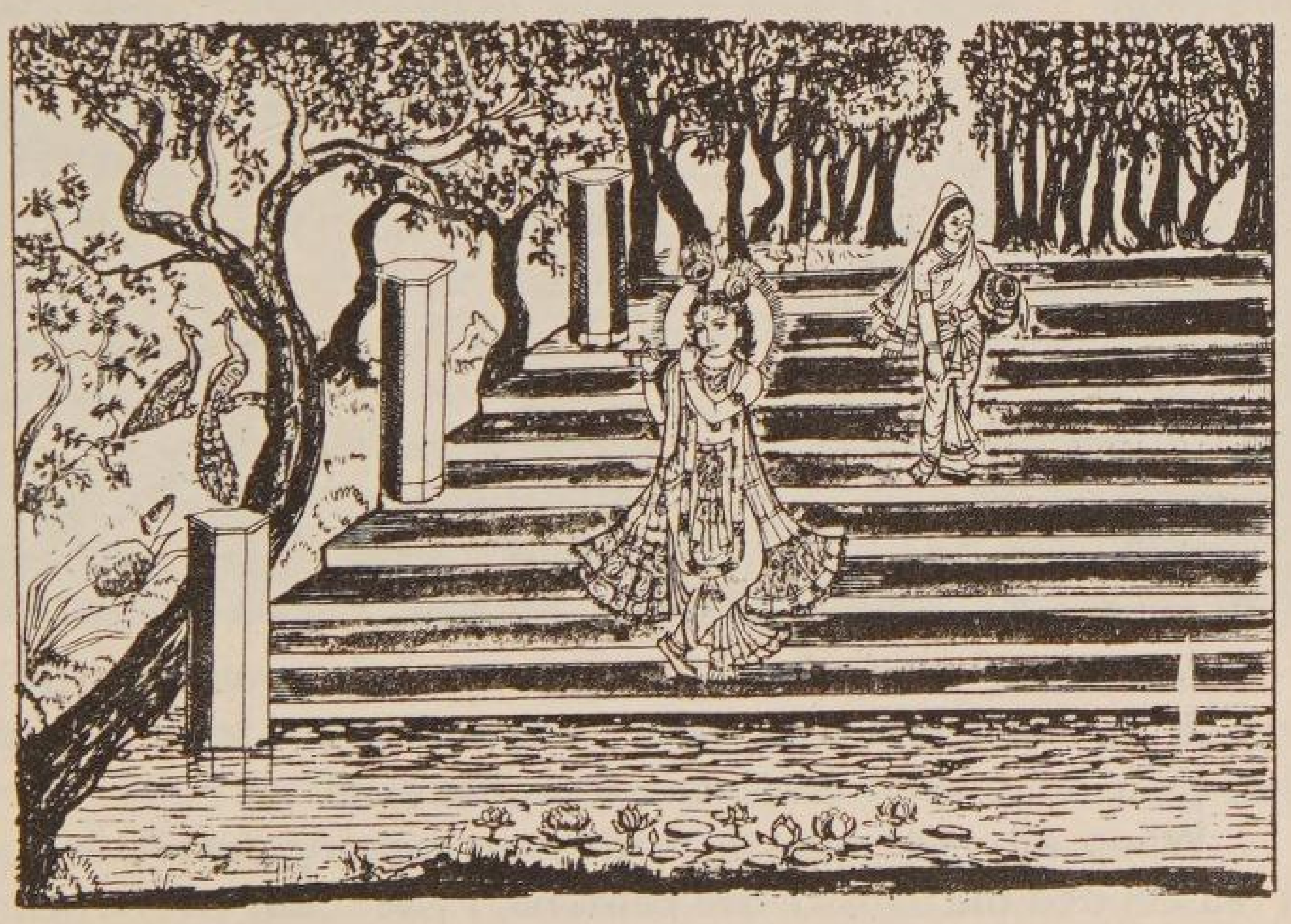
mused that here only birds stole ripe guavas; but if it had been in my village, nothing would have been left - all those boys would have. . .

Again ! A similar sound interrupted my musing, as suddenly the birds flapped their wings, landing across the road not far away. It was then that I spotted the turbaned guards patrolling the orchard with slings in their hands. Oh God! It was the same as at home - here too there was no safety, then?

My mind turned back to the purpose at hand, and I proceeded quickly on towards the Yamuna.

From a distance, an abundance of water suddenly dazzled my eyes. Oh, what spontaneous waves of joy engulfed me! Reaching the shore-line, I stopped in wonder. Many reminders of antiquity remain around the brick-built bathing-place. Gazing at the old banked steps leading down into the sacred waters, I again stepped back into the past, thinking:

"Perhaps these are the very banks where once grew those Kadamba trees in which Sri Krishna hide the clothes of the Gopis. On the very ground on which I stand, perhaps Sri Radha herself may have trod many times with her friends! On these steps she may have played and splashed water on her companions. While sitting here they may have sung and laughed and told many a story. And as the golden hue of the setting sun was reflected in the dark currents of the Yamuna, Radha would be there to fill her water-jug in the hope that she might catch a glimpse of her beloved ! But there were also days when Radha did not come. . .when perhaps Sri Krishna would sit on there very banks, calling to her on his flute:



"Radha, Radha!" Or like some modern poets, he may have composed such a song as this:

"On just such an evening as this
My beloved would oft venture forth,
Clay jug balanced gently on her hip:
Water splish-splashing out as she moved–
Oh, water of love, drenching her graceful flimsy robes!"

But alas! Today where is that bathing-place which once graced the banks of these waters? Except for a few remaining broken steps, all of that scene has become part of the river itself with the passing of time. And the spirit of yesterday's Yamuna has also vanished. There is no longer the force of that flow, and the flood-crest of spring waters no longer surges forward. Yes, the river still flows, but where is her spirit? Perhaps, without Lord Krishna the Yamuna moves on as though wounded in her heart; without him, she is not vibrant. The dense growth of Kadamba and Tamal tress no longer lines her banks; and no more those flocks of peacocks and deer dwell in the deep shade of yesterday. Nowhere does the gorgeousness of festive arrangements surround theYamuna today; that air of something unique and glorious has vanished.

At the sight of the Yamuna in that condition, a sigh unconsciously escaped me. Soon, crossing a stretch of sand, I knelt at the edge of the cool blue flow. Standing on the sandy bank I took her sacred water in my folded hands, poured it from them onto my head and chest, and drank some. Then I entered the water slowly.

I began to wade deeper into the river, but to my surprise I found it only as deep as my knees! How was I to bathe? Well, by lying down and moving from one side to the other on the sandy bottom, I was finally able to splash myself all over.

Ah! It was wonderful...this wasn't water, it was more like the nectar of Radha-Krishna's love. . .love flowing from the inner beings of a thousand Gopis in a liquid stream!

When, after finishing my bath by immersing my whole body, I reascended the bank of the Yamuna, I was really overwhelmed with emotional ecstasy. Supreme beauty had then his advent in my heart. The beauty of eternal Brindavan, for which I had been longing, appeared before my eyes. Whatever I saw was exceedingly beautiful.

Wherever I looked, I saw this incredible beauty; even ordinary physical objects took on a wonderful appearance. All was delight to my eyes. I had been carried back to the Brindavan of yesterday:

"For this one moment lived the ages past;
The world now throbs fulfilled in me at last."
(Sri Aurobindo)

I too felt like the poet who said:

Even now Brindavan sways the heart of man
In the full-moon nights of Automn,
And in the rain-wet days of Shravan,[1]
Still arises the song of separation in the woods and bushes!

Still that flute calls on the bank of the Yamuna
Even now continues love's play,
All through the night and day,
Still Radha continues to weep in the core of heart!

All of a sudden Kashiram's words came to my mind. While we were on the road to Brindavan, Kashiram had said,

"First enter Brindavan, and then whatever you want to see, you will see." I began to wonder. . .how could he have prophesied so well? Had he too seen all this beauty I now saw? Perhaps he had, perhaps this happens to all who enter this extraordinary world of Brindavan!

Oh, my meal time! Suddenly remembering the Brahmachari, I rushed back to the Sevashram. Entering the compound, I saw the Brahmachari pacing back and forth on the verandah. Seeing me, he exclaimed, "My God! So much time just to take a bath! Go quickly to the kitchen - the cook is waiting for you!"

Feeling sorry, I said, "Right away, sir. This was my very first bath in the Yamuna, that's why. . ."

I was going to explain further the cause for my delay, but the Brahmachari had resumed his pacing up and down, engrossed within himself. Quickly hanging my towel on the line, I asked him the way to the kitchen.

"Come, I'll take you there." The Brahmachari escorted me to the kitchen.

A mat had been spread out for me and the cook was waiting to serve the food. When he saw me he brought out a dish of rice. It was just like Bengali food. There were lentils, a fried vegetable, curry and *postu* (a ground grain preparation used with vegetables).

I washed my hands and sat down on the mat. Just then, someone crawled like a baby towards my plate, grabbed a handful of my rice and disappeared - all in an instant!

The cook came running, serving-spoon in his raised hand. Hearing the commotion, the Brahmachari rushed in from the courtyard, bamboo rod in hand. The shouting continued for some time, but the thief had long since vanished.

This whole thing occurred so quickly that I was only half aware of it all. If the thief had run out the front entrance, I would have assumed him to be a mischievous ashram boy. But this culprit had scaled one of the bamboo poles supporting the kitchen roof and flipped over onto the upstairs terrace -still grasping the handful of rice!

The cook, seeing me stare helplessly at my plate, remarked,

"Oh, you're really surprised, aren't you? In Brindavan the monkeys startle everyone. But here no one minds it - it happens often. We just go ahead and finish our food!"

As he spoke, he came over with a dish and spooned the rice the monkey had touched off my plate. Then he brought fresh rice from the kitchen.

Still I was stunned. There was an uncomfortable feeling within me. I was thinking that I had passed these two days with a stomach only half-filled with bread bought with the coins I had been given at Mathura Jail. So to speak, this was the first time that I had received the blessed rice prasad of Radharani at Brindavan; and on this very day, a monkey came between me and that rice prasad of Grace? What future was in store for me?

Seeing me still sitting there, not eating, the cook inquired,

"What's wrong? Don't you want to eat food from the plate the monkey has touched? Shall I cook a fresh meal for you?"

Hearing him say that he would recook the meal, I at once came to my senses - how could I think of letting this food go to waste? With that I got busy and ate my food.

After the meal, as I stood basking in the sun in the courtyard, the Swamiji of this Sevashram, who stayed in the corner room on the ground-floor, called me to his room:

"Come here, let's have a chat," he said.

I went to his room. He was seated in a chair covered with a saffron cloth. As I began to seat myself at his feet, he strongly objected:

"Don't sit on the floor; it is too cold. Go, sit on that wooden stool - I brought it here for you."

I had noticed the stool, but out of respect I had been reluctant to sit at the same level with him. At his insistence, however, I moved to the stool.

He inquired about my past, and I related it all to him. Afterwards he asked,

"Are you sure that these books will be of no further help to you?"

I said, "Yes, Swamiji, you may give them to whomever you wish."

He then said, "Well, we have a student staying here with us, who studies at Mathura College. He would benefit from them. You should just feel that these books are at your home, and whenever you want them back they will be here for you."

"No, no; sir," I protested. "I shall never demand them back!"

As the Swamiji was speaking Bengali with me, I noticed his distinctive dialect. I recognized it as originating from the Khulna district of Bengal. In that dialect, nothing is stated in the first person. Instead of saying 'I will do', they say 'this body will do' - so that everything is depersonalized. What a good mechanism for helping to rid one of the feeling of ego! I had been searching for just such a language, for such a way to express even small events without the use of 'I'. Because of this search, I at once recognized what these colloquialisms meant.

As I left the Swamiji's room, the Brahmacharis called me to theirs. In this Sevashram there were two young men in this category. One was a disciple of the resident Swamiji there. The other was a disciple of the Swamiji from Gaya who was now temporarily in residence as well. Both were still in training. Neither of them had yet been initiated into sannyas - the stage of complete renunciation; their heads were clean shaven, and they were dressed in white. There was also a student of Mathura College living in the Sevashram under the Swamiji's sponsorship and guidance. And lastly there was one salaried cook. His duties were to cook and serve food for the residents and for passing pilgrims. He did not live there. In all there were only five actual residents on the premises.

My first day there I learned much about the Sevashram without much effort, and at the same time I made my acquaintance with all the residents as well. After so many anxious and unsettling days, this first one in the ashram passed very smoothly, quickly and happilly.

The next day, shortly after sunrise, the Swamiji of Gaya was out in the courtyard supervising the masons' work, and I was sitting in the verandah on a bench, shivering.

Noticing me, the Swamiji called out, "Hey, young man - I forget your name - why are you sitting there in the shade? Come over here into the sun."

As I walked over to him, he asked, "Did you sleep well last night?"

I couldn't reply at once; after all, what could I say? The Ashram was not intended for comfort. There had been no bedding, only a heavy cotton mat (no blanket), and my own clothing and cotton shawl were thin. Because of the biting cold, I had awakened several times during the night, shivering. Just as I would finally begin to drop off into a deep sleep, the Brahmachari would come in to take me for worship, which occurred every three hours. This had happened four times during the night, and everyone's presence was required. In that biting cold I had to go downstairs into the open courtyard for half an hour of meditation and chanting. Then it was back to our rooms. And it seemed that no sooner would I drop off to sleep again, than I would be aroused to repeat the same procedure. So how could I have a good sleep? And yet I did not wish to offend him. If I was to stay here, I must adjust to their schedule. But I could mention the cold: so I said that I did not sleep well because of the bitter cold - in the midst of deep sleep I had awakened shivering.

"What?" he said, "you were shivering? Yes, you are bound to be chilled. But what to do, we do not keep bedding here. Let me see if I can find some extra clothes - come with me."

He took me to his room upstairs and gave me two of his own saffron robes to use, saying, "Take these. You can use one as a bottom sheet, and the other on top of you. Now put them in your room and then join me downstairs. I will have some work for you."

After doing as he said, I joined him.

"Do you know where the Post Office is?" he asked.

"The main Post Office?" I asked. For I knew the main Post Office from which Kashiram had sent his telegram.

"No, you need not go so far. There is a branch close by." He pointed out the way, saying, "Go straight ahead, looking for a signboard on the right side. Purchase four postcards and one stamped envelope."

He gave me the money, but as I was leaving he called me back, saying, "Bring me two inlands, also."

Now I was in a fix. Had I heard him correctly? 'Inlands'? What in the world are 'inlands'? If I had been thinking, I would have inquired at the Post Office itself; but instead I went back to the Swamiji and inquired, "What are 'inlands'?"

The Swamiji was dumbfounded. "You don't even know what inlands are? Why did you tell me you had gone to college? How in the word do you expect me to believe you now?"

I could see that I had a big problem on my hands. In College they hadn't taught us about 'inlands'. To learn that, one has to have written letters and have gone to the Post Office - but I had never before had cause to go there. I had never corresponded with anyone. My school friends would often ask the postman if he had mail for them, and he would hand them letters immediately; but when I asked for letters the postman had told me, "First become a big boy, then I will have letters in envelopes for you!"

But perhaps even now I was not yet a big boy, because somehow it had not yet been my fortune to receive even one letter in an envelope through the post!

Anyway, I simply could not convince the Swamiji of my innocence. Finally, after many arguments and retorts, he explained what 'inlands' were, still looking at me suspiciously. Then he said, "Go to the Post Office first. When you return I'll take you to the temple for some work. And in the evening after *arati* (worship with lights in the evening), I would like you to come to my room so that I can examine you a bit."

On my return I went to the temple, and the Brahmachari of Gaya, whose work I was to do, explained my duties to me. A framed picture of the founder of the Sevashram, Sri Pranabanandaji, stood on a small dais. Upon the floor lay a variety of utensils for puja - a large round copper tray on which the symbol for 'AUM' was drawn in sandalwood paste, a ceremonial bell, an oil lamp, two boat-shaped copper vessels used to hold water, fresh flowers, the sacred *tulsi* (basil) leaves, a small dish of sandalwood paste, incense sticks and the fragrant aroma of frankincense, and so on.

After each puja, these containers and trays needed to be cleaned, wiped and put back into place. And this work was given to me. I was also to wash the floor and wipe it dry before each puja. I began the work at once, starting with the floor; then I cleaned the vessels, and after that drew a fresh 'AUM' again on the tray. I gathered flowers from the trees in the courtyard-garden in a basket, and put them in place. After everything else was done, I put the two Swamijis' and Brahmacharis' meditation mats into their respective positions.

When I had finished, the Brahmachari who instructed me in my work complimented me, "Ah! I see that you have done everything correctly."

What a feeling of good fortune welled up inside me! After arriving in Brindavan I had found work in direct service to the Divine - and such a fine Swamiji and such good accommodation! It was beyond all my expectations. I was filled with deep gratitude to the Divine.

In each small incident, I felt the compassion of the Swamiji of Gaya. Imagine: though I had only just arrived, I had been given work in the temple itself, which thrust my whole being into the mainstream of the ashram atmosphere.

Anyway, following that first evening's puja and dinner, the Brahmachari motioned to me, "Come, Swamiji wants you up in his room."

So, the Swamiji had not forgotten his words! I sensed that a real test was ahead for me.

The Swamiji was seated on one end of his cot, under the mosquito netting, facing away from the door; but when he heard my footsteps, he turned towards me and said, "So, you have come. Come here and be seated on the mat. I have kept those newspapers for you. I would like you to read them for me."

I had been expecting some sort of a test. But when he told me to read the newspapers, I forgot all about an examination. I assumed that he simply wanted to hear the news, and that after my reading he would begin to test me. Seeing a whole stack of newspapers there, I didn't know where to begin. So I asked the Swamiji,

"Do you want me to read the papers straight through, or should I read out the headlines first, so that you can select?"

Swamiji replied, "No, no, just begin with the first page. I want to hear you read."

"So, he doesn't even believe I can read - Oh, my goodness! The examination of my learning is to start with just reading out of the newspaper!"

But I did not reveal my thoughts - keeping my surprise to myself, I began to read.

After I had read several sentences, the Swamiji interrupted me: "That's enough. You needn't read any further. Do you ever read newspapers?"

"No, sir," I replied. "Even if I had the time, I still wouldn't like to spend it on newspapers."

"Then," he said with a slight smile, "You are a counterfeit coin which has no value and no use either. Well, you don't read the papers, but have you ever read the Gita?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you understand what the word 'Gita' means?"

"The meaning of 'Gita'? I have read in Sri Ramakrishna's *Kathamrita* that if you continue repeating the word 'Gita' long enough, it will become 'Tagi' which means surrender, and the most significant meaning to be found in the Gita itself is to take refuge completely in the Divine, to surrender one's whole being to the Lord. In Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, the surrender of one's whole being to the Lord is the Gita's ultimate solution."

I then expounded to the Swamiji my understanding of the Gita:

The Divine Teacher taught Arjuna in various ways: "Have faith in me, do your assigned work poised in Yoga, transcend the three *gunas* (or modes of life), surrender your whole life and work to me; upon those conditions, I promise to deliver you from the ocean of rebirth and death."

But upon hearing the enormity of what he was to do, Arjuna lost heart, sitting down dejectedly. So then to make it simpler, the teacher said, "What has become of you? Will you not be able? Well, lend me your ear, I will tell you more lucidly: only concentrate your mind on me. If you say you are unable to concentrate on me, then begin with 'Yoga of Practice'. Is it possible to be concentrated on me in a moment? You will achieve it in the course of time by practice. And if you say you have a forgetful mind, that you forget while practising, then at least have recourse to the Yoga of Surrender of the Fruits of Work. It doesn't matter at all if you forget- only offer me that at the end of your work; that will do - thereby I will be pleased."

Yet the advice still fell short of the disciple's satisfaction. At last the Teacher said, "Very well. You will have to do nothing more, but will you be able to bow to me? Do that only. Only bow to me. Be my devotee. Surrender yourself exclusively with heart and soul to me. Forego all religion and take refuge in me alone...."

After I had been going on for some time in this vein, I suddenly became aware once more of the presence of the Swamiji, who had been listening to me attentively....and as I became conscious of him, the flow of my words ceased.

"All right," he said. "Now read the Gita to me."

He took a copy of it from the shelf and handed it to me saying, "Start from the beginning."

I began reading, although I knew most of it by heart:

"Dhritarashtra said...:" and I continued until I came to "yuyutsava bharata...."

There he stopped me. "What is the meaning of this verse?" he asked.

I explained to him what I understood. After this I could definitely see that he was happy about my interpretation of the Gita, though I don't know if all his doubts about me had vanished. After I had finished reading the first chapter, he halted me in a pleased voice, and told me to put the book away.

"Each evening I would like you to read to me from the Gita." he said.

So I knew I had made the Swamiji happy, and I felt a great contentment within myself - way out of proportion to its supposed cause. I burst out singing within myself, "I sense that I have the Swamiji's full acceptance, and with it his compassion. There is nothing more to fear. I am no longer suspect. I will not be driven from this place. Now I shall be able to put up with all inconvenience and difficulty to my living in the Ashram."

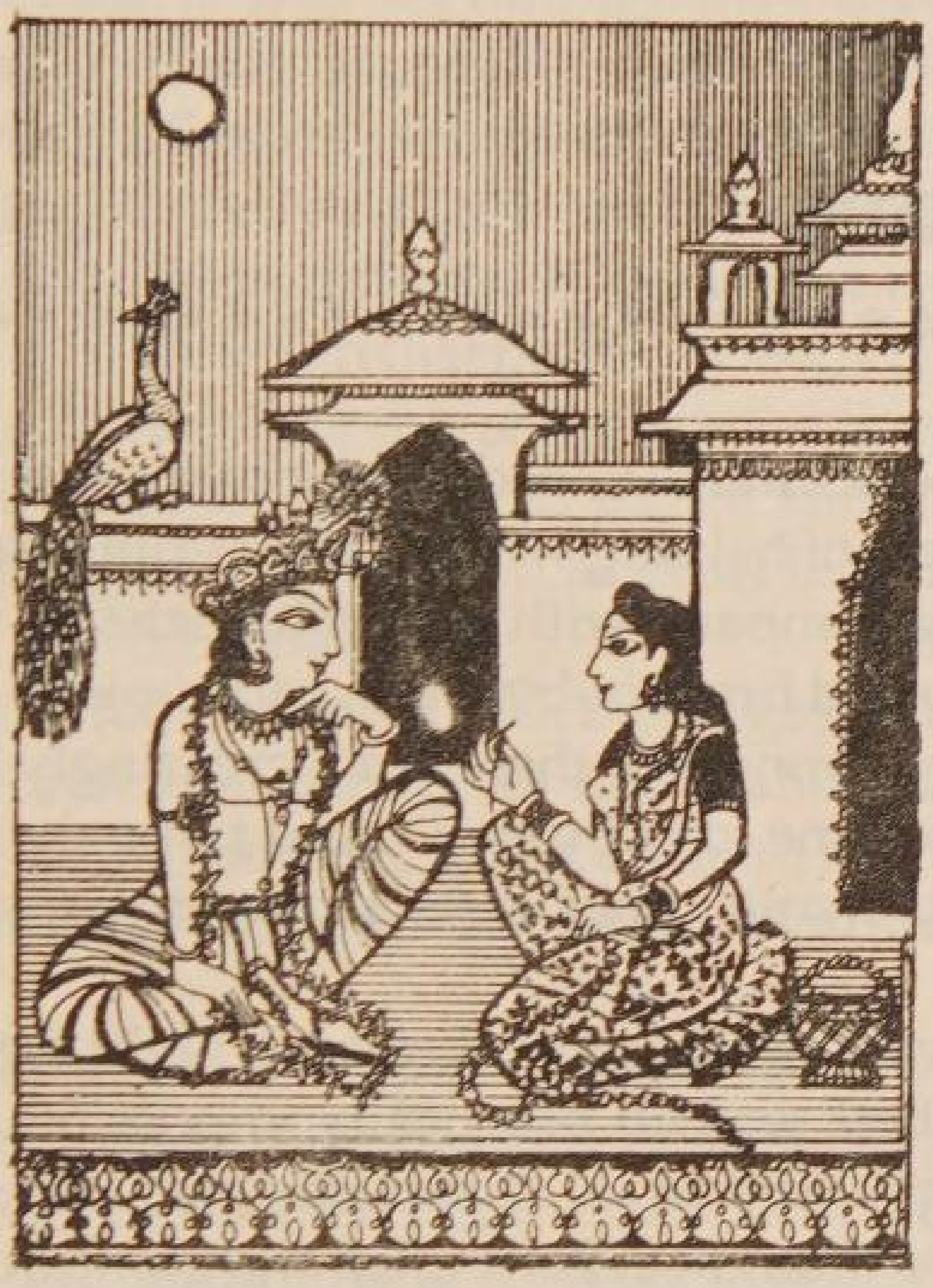
And like Sri Radha, I too wanted to say:

O Friend!
Let thousands of neightingales sing together now,
Let millions and millions of moons rise up in the sky,
Let the arrows of Divine Love increase beyond count,
Let those southern soothing breezes blow softly now.

This means, our Radha is telling us that the nightingale's sweet song, the hum of bees swarming over succulent flowers, the undulating caress of the spring breeze, the cool brightness of full-moon nights - all these things once tortured her heart like the pangs of death, because they reminded her of the separation from her beloved. But now Sri Krishna is back with her, she finds that they pain her no more; she asks the nightingales to sing, the moons to rise and rise again, she awaits Love's arrows and asks for more of them, and she calls the spring breezes to swirl around her from all sides!

Tonight passed away with good fortune,
For I gazed on my lover's moon-like face;

Life and youth seemed to be fruitful to me
The ten directions seemed to be out of conflict now!



Note and References

1. Shravan: the fourth month of the Bangali calendar - approximately equivalent to July-August.

Chapter Four

The days in Bharat Sevashram flowed by smoothly and happily. I had a regular schedule of helping with pujas, reading, serving the Swamiji and keeping company with the Brahmacharis. The Swamiji from Gaya, who had first doubted me, had come to rely upon me more than upon anyone else there; he increasingly showered his kind favours upon me, day by day. And not only the test of confidence, but also many other tests I passed promptly and successfully.

For instance, waking up four times each night for puja and then meditating, at first seemed practically impossible. At first I felt I would never get used to it. It was so cold there on those winter nights, that the thought of getting up and going out into that open courtyard in the dark was almost more than I could bear. And on top of that, to have to do it four times each night, exactly every three hours! Unimaginable for one like me who had never been accustomed to it!

But somehow even this became a matter of course within a few days; I began to wake up of my own accord before the others and to start meditation. The Brahmachari of Gaya, seeing me there on the first day I woke up early, commented,

"What's going on? Yesterday we couldn't even rouse you from sleep, and today you're here before us! Did you wake up without sleeping?"

Laughing, I replied, "That's right I wanted to beat you to it!"

In these first few days an affectionate relationship had developed between the two of us. I took it as a good omen. Actually, I had to spend more time with the two Brahmacharis than with the Swamijis; conversation, work and mealtimes were spent in their company. We were of the same age. And even with the favour of the Swamiji, a stay of any length in the Sevashram would have been impossible without the friendship of these two.

Of course, it was not through my own efforts that this came about - rather it was especially due to the Brahmachari of Gaya. Since it was his Swamiji who had accepted me, I became closest to him; in every activity he took me as his partner.

In his opinion, Brindavan was both the best place and the worst place to be. From that point of view, I had had a hair-breadth escape - to have found this shelter in the Sevashram at my young age. He advised me on how to adjust and to be cautious in order to avoid danger. He went on at great length with examples and stories of various kinds.

When I look back upon all the stages of my stay in Brindavan, I now see that the gaining of this Brahmachari's friendship was perhaps equal to passing a very difficult high examination. To the eyes of others it might not seem that way, but within me I know it to be so.

And was it a mere pass? I seemed to be passing with double promotion. Not only did the Brahmachari help me - he even allowed me to take over some of his own responsibilities, most willingly and without any sense of loss on his part. Few and far apart are the human beings who find it so easy to whole-heartedly give up positions of responsibility, even to those with whom they have been intimate for a lifetime. But even this happened in my case; I was fortunate enough to have found such a person.

One fine morning, the Brahmachari suddenly asked me, "You have come to Brindavan...so tell me, which essential quality is predominant here?"

"The emotion of love and delight." I answered spontaneously without thinking.

Laughingly he replied, "Perhaps you say this remembering the Gopis? Yes, yes, that is certainly an element...as the poet says:

'Two lovers entwined in each other's lap -
And yet they are sad, contemplating separation!'

In that way, we are all like Radha. But I'm not asking that. I want to know what is the underlying purpose of these ashrams, monasteries, Dhanchhatras[1] and so on? What is their *raison* *d'etre?"*

"Their purpose?" I said, "I don't know."

"Why don't you know? You can see it everywhere with your own eyes! It's service...that is the true purpose. It is a service to humanity, and here it manifests as love and joy. Service itself is happiness! Nowhere else will you be able to see service performed with such love as here in Brindavan. In that way this place is very special. And for this reason, I am very fond of this place!"

"Really?" I replied, "I hadn't thought of it in that way."

"Oh yes," he said. "If you just step out into the street you will get your proof. Even the oldest women...those who sit by the side of the road with their water pots and perhaps a few handfuls of a local food preparation - powder of fried wheat - on their plates...do you know why they sit there? Their sole purpose is to distribute what they have made to tired hungry travellers - in other words, to serve.

"And speaking of service," he continued, "I would now like to give you the opportunity to do likewise."

With enthusiasm I replied, "Oh yes! In what way can I serve? If it is within my capacities I will be happy to help!"

"Oh, I know very well that you can do it," he said. "It seems that I need to go to Gaya for a few days. I would like you to take the responsibility for Swamiji's tiffin while I am gone. If you agree to this, I will be free of all worries while I'm there. This is what is involved: in the late afternoon Swamiji takes bananas and warm milk. Both items need to be brought from the market. Will you do it?"

I was silent. I did not want to do it, but I couldn't just say 'no to his face.

Taking my silence as agreement, he enthusiastically continued, "Come, I'll take you just now and show you where to find both the bananas and the milk."

Unable to speak a word, I found myself following him out to the market. As we walked along he cautioned me,

"But be sure to bring everything in good time. If it arrives too late, Swamiji won't eat it then...And something else to remember: Swamiji will never remind you or ask you for anything for himself. If it is not done, he simply goes without; so should you forget, Swamiji will go hungry.

"I'll leave some money with you," he continued. "If you run low, ask him in plenty of time for more. Remember, I won't be here to take care of him, so do be attentive to any needs he might have. Each morning bring him fresh water for washing his face. After his bath, hang his wet clothes in the sun. Actually, there will be many such small jobs which you can best learn by watching me. In this way you will also find yourself becoming much closer to him. Of course, even now he has a great affection for you..."

It turned out that the Brahmachari was to leave within a very few days, and in that period he trained me to take his place completely, so that the Swamiji would not be inconvenienced in the least.

So this was the reason why I said that I was about to be conferred double promotion!

But instead of feeling promoted within myself, in another matter I was going to cut a sorry figure in the exam. It was a subtle feeling of which I was hardly conscious...or rather it was a dawning awareness which I had been pushing into the background... because, if, at that moment, I had squarely faced the whole situation, I would again have been out of the shelter, wandering through the streets of Brindavan!

But in the end, I found that I could not avoid the inevitable. I found that with my outer life completely revolving around the activities of the Sevashram, within me there was a growing disharmony. At night I could not sleep. I could not feel any joy in sitting, standing or eating. Something indescribable was wrong. It was a lack of something... as if an intense pain were lurking behind every additional opportunity that I was being given.

When one feels joy at the beauty of a rose, for example, one easily overlooks the pricks of its thorns. But my particular pain was not of that variety. If it had been, I could easily have borne it uncomplainingly.

But no! The problem that I increasingly felt, began to take shape like a matter of life or death. Of course, it is also true that what is a problem to me, is not a problem at all to others. On hearing of it, they will say, "Pooh! Is this a problem? Does anybody make such a fuss over this?" Even the Swamiji said to me, "How foolish you are! Why are you thinking so much about this? Why so much concern about such a trivial matter?"

But I still remember how the problem spread throughout my whole consciousness that day, until I was panting for breath in bottomless water - as if I were fully immersed in water, floundering, struggling to keep afloat. It was overwhelming. And that is why I feel it necessary to narrate here all about that extraordinary problem:

With hindsight, I can now see that it was of course an error on my part to have gone to the Sevashram in the first place. If I had never gone there, it would have saved the Swamiji a lot of difficulty, not to mention what I went through. Had I known this at that time, I certainly would not have thought myself so lucky to get that work in the temple.

Yes, it was this total immersion in the work that finally dealt the death-blow to my stay there. In the long run, the job, with so much service and worship for Swami Pranabananadaji, the founder of the Sevashram, had become so all-consuming that I had no time or opportunity to remember my own Gurudev, Sri Aurobindo. The form, the deity that I had always seen within myself, began to fade. Although I tried over and over to retain the vision of it within me, I could not. In fact, when I did try, the forms of Swami Pranabanandaji or the Swami of Gaya himself would float before my eyes. And outside myself as well ... wherever I looked in the Sevashram, my eyes fell upon aspects of his presence. As if Pranabanandaji's soul enwrapped the whole atmosphere of the Sevashram: the Swamijis, the Brahmacharis, the temple, the cook, the servants...in each and every particle, I could see only Pranabanandaji.

Then, just at that time, coincidental with my increased calamity and involvement in it, came a new shock: I lost the possessions that I valued above all others ... the photos of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, which I kept always inside my banian, against my chest. In this way I felt their force and protection. It was a tremendous loss to me. I began to think:

"Why did it happen? Was it wrong for me to have come to the

Bharat Sevashram? I had kept the photos in that way for two months, and nothing happened ... why have I lost them now?"

Such an anxiety on one hand ... and on the other hand, another kind of pang joined it. so far, I had conceived that my Gurudev and the Mother were always in my heart, that my constant communion with them in Yoga was so firm that distance did not matter at all...so what harm was there if I could not live near the Mother in the Ashram at Pondicherry?

But no! At that moment I realised my mistake. I suddenly understood that my feelings of not needing to be near the Mother in the Ashram had really come from my hurt feelings against the Mother. Yes, because I had not been permitted to stay at the Ashram. Not knowing the ropes of the Ashram, I had never found a way to contact the Mother directly. But the omniscient Mother could see all, understand my aspiration. Then why had she not arranged for me to stay there? So, out of hurt feelings against the Mother, I had thought, "What does it matter to me if I can't live in the Ashram? I shall now live anywhere... whether in Brindavan or Mathura, or in any other place near the Himalayas; and wherever I live will be Pondicherry to me!"

But here in the Sevashram I was reminded at each and every moment by the Brahmachari of what it means to serve one's Guru with a complete devotion; and seeing this made me miss Pondicherry more than ever. The feeling that I should be there and nowhere else continued to grow on me. It seemed to me that I had got nothing like the Brahmachari. Just as a devoted wife wishes only for the happiness of her husband, the Brahmachari concerned and dedicated himself throughout the whole day and night to his Guru - the Swamiji of Gaya.

It was my job to place the Swamiji's mat for meditation very neatly on the floor, while I was doing the work at the temple. Now, after I had done this, the Brahmachari would, for example, come over and slightly re-adjust it ... as if his finishing touch just had to be there. When he served breakfast to his master, it was done so quietly that I would not even know that it had been done, had I not watched it in process. After this the water for Swamiji's bath was placed in the sun to become warm; and after the bath the Brahmachari was right there to hand him his clothes and to hang his wet things out in the sun. At mealtimes he served Swamiji his food, at tea-time gave him milk and bananas. In the early evening he would prepare the bed in the upstairs room so that the Swamiji could meditate there easily; and even during the night he checked on him several times to see that all was well. Yes, this was his sadhana all day long. It was his whole life.

Of course, the Brahmachari was not completely selfish regarding his master; he gave me the opportunity, off and on, to serve him too. He would say, "Do this, take that, give this to Swamiji..." etc. But I could by no means do it as the Brahamachari did. Everything seemed to me somewhat insipid...without salt and empty. Something was missing. I felt I could never be a second Brahmachari. But his example did have an effect on me. When I saw him serve his master as he did, more and more of a yearning to serve my own masters grew within me.

Alas! Why had I come to Brindavan - this eternal land of error? What a mistake I had made! "If I had only stayed in my own village," I thought, "I would have been able to set off for Pondicherry some day. But from here, I have no chance at all! I don't see how I will ever get there!"

It kept running through my mind that if only this Ashram had been the ashram of my Gurus, it would have been heaven for me. Then wherever I gazed I would have been reminded of my Masters. I would have been in the company of fellow-devotees of my Masters; I would have been in their atmosphere, breathing their very air. My whole environment would have been one filled with golden light!

I would frequently recollect the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and like the Yoksha of Kalidasa's *Meghdoot*,[2] exiled in the Ramgiri mountain, I too heaved a long sigh, looking in the direction of too-distant Pondicherry!

But what a misfortune! In addition I felt a tightness which reminds me of a poem:

Thain nai, thain nai,
Chhotto se tori!

'No room, no room,
Small is the boat!'[3]

And the turmoil within me continued. I often felt like breaking through the barrier, which this whole situation seemed to have become, by leaving the Sevashram altogether. Then I would be free again and once more able to renew my connection with my Gurus and with the real Brindavan as well. Sometimes I thought, "Why not forget these obligations and my word that I would serve as best I could? Let me just drop everything here and now, and simply take off!"

Actually there was no one to stop me. I could have simply walked out the door. But then what? Should I wander in the street again, forsaking such a reliable shelter? Oh, the security of that life was a very strong attraction! These attachments felt like glue under my feet, and somehow I could see no way out of it.

During the day I avoided this problem through constant work. But when the day was done, I would feel that lump in my throat once again. it was in this condition that I heard the grave voice of Sri Aurobindo speaking to me,

"Didn't I tell you not to go to any other person?"

His words cut through me like lightning. I remembered, "Ah, yes! He said that... in Mathura jail...yes, they were his last words to me." And all this time I had neglected to pay heed to what he had said. I had been so elated by his acceptance of me that I had forgotten his words.

No! I had not actually forgotten. How could I ? Was that a thing to be forgotten? I had thought, "Sri Aurobindo has accepted me, and I too had greeted him consciously, even before Mathura jail, as my Master. So how does this question arise, of going to any other person?"

But I had been very careless. I had not perceived that every word of an omniscient Guru is to be carefully heeded. There is a reason for each and every word. Why would he have told me not to go to any other person, if it were not to be a difficulty for me?

Remembering all this I became filled with an intense gratitude: "Oh, what care my Guru takes of me!" I thought. "He warned me just at this critical moment of my life - when I was about to come to Brindavan from Mathura without any of the monetary resources which would be necessary to maintain myself in a strange place, so that the necessity would surely arise of srurrendering myself to some monastery, temple or high-souled saint, just for the sake of food and shelter!"

Well, let all that be. Realising that the Brahmachari was leaving soon for Gaya, I knew that I should delay no longer. The very next day, seeing the Swamiji by himself, I went over and spoke to him about the whole situation:

"Swamiji, I admit my error in staying here. You knew from the beginning that I would not be able to last. Now I understand why you said, "Well, remain here; see if you can remain.' But at that time I ignored that hesitant acceptance. Please forgive me, but I feel the need to leave today itself."

When he heard this, the Swamiji became quite anxious:

"Why so suddenly? Where will you go?" he asked.

"I don't know; at present I have no place to go to. I can't go to Pondicherry without permission; and besides that, it's impossible to get that far without a ticket. Until arrangements can be made, I'll have to stay somewhere else in Brindavan."

He gave me a look of kind compassion, almost too kind, and began consoling me:

"There, there." he said. "Why do you need to leave this place so suddenly? No, no, my boy! I did not mean to imply that you could not adjust here. Why would I have allowed you to stay here if I had felt that way? Don't let these small things consume you. They don't matter. Just go back to your work."

I had thought that my words would make the Swamiji very angry; seeing my fickle-mindedness he would surely throw me out immediately. But, good Lord! They seemed to have had the opposite effect!

Actually it would have been much better if I had been thrown out. It would have been much, much easier than all the many excuses that I found myself having to make.

Seeing me standing there hesitatingly, he began to coax me to stay on:

"My boy, would you like to study further? Whatever course you wish to take, I will support you throughout...whether medicine or law or engineering ...anything you choose! It is not enough that we sannyasis deal only wih meditation and puja ceremonies. The Brahmacharis here are all highly educated. They are often called upon to speak to public meetings about the Vedas, the Gita, the Upanishads and Philosophy. Sometimes they go from place to place to gather contributions for social service work, in famine, epidemics and for refugees; and they even offer the sweat of their own toil in times of great need. For all these tasks knowledge is very necessary. Tell me, does any of this interest you?"

Very quietly I replied, "No Swamiji, I don't wish to study further. I had the chance and all kinds of means for that earlier, but I turned it down. Now I constantly think, 'Many other people are dying suddenly ... what if I too die instantly'?"

This made the Swamiji truly furious. He at once started scolding me:

"Stop! Stop all your tall talk, right now! A boy of eighteen or nineteen speaking of death! Tell me this frankly, are you leaving here to avoid all the work? That's why I didn't give you any heavy work. I know you boys of today inside out...you all fear work more than death. Just how do you intend to fill your stomach?...By begging from door to door like all the other loafers?"

"Swamiji," said I, "Why did you not give me heavy work? If you had given me the work of construction, like these masons and labourers here, perhaps I could have adjusted. Working in the dust with the bricks and cement, and staying and eating elsewhere as they do...perhaps then I might have been able to stay."

"Then go ahead, stay and work with them...who is stopping?" he replied angrily.

"No, Swamiji, it's too late. It's not possible to stay here now. How can I convince you...?"

"Don't try. Enough of this. I have a lot of things to do - I'll hear your words later."

The Swamiji stood up.

Now I felt very bad. I had rejected the affection and attention he had so often showered upon me. Why had I come to this place? As all this ran through my mind, it became very painful.

But no matter how painful it had all been, later I felt relieved... and that sense of freedom began to surface once again. Then I realised that it was my soul's urge that had been behind this action;

whether today or a few days hence, I would have had to make this break. *"Subhasya sighram"* - the sooner, the better!

But things had been left hanging in mid-air. No final decision had yet been taken. The Swamiji's last words had not been spoken in anger- "Well then, get away from here!"

I went back to the daily routine of my work, anxious for the resolution, all day long.

In the afternoon, as I was relaxing on a bench on the verandah at the front of the main gate, a group of chattering travellers entered the compound through the gate. In the forefront was a young man. Around his neck hung binoculars; in one hand he carried a bag, in the other a suitcase. He was leading the way. Beside him walked a young lady wearing sunglasses, a camera-bag on her shoulder. Behind them was another young lady carrying a boy on her hip and holding the hand of a little girl. And in the rear came several elderly persons. This was the tourist season in Brindavan and a train had just arrived. People like this were expected now and were welcome at Sevashram because helping travellers was the main function of this place and its primary source of income as well.

At first glance I identified them as an extended family: a wage-earner taking his loved-ones on a pilgrimage. But with this happy scene before my eyes, I became more distraught than ever. Oh, I had no one, no one in the whole world! How unlucky I was! Here I was, on the verge of leaving this warm secure shelter ... "But what is next? Where should I go from here?"

I was engulfed in a feeling of hopelessness. But all this was only for a few seconds. Then I caught myself: "What am I thinking of? What is this sadness?"

I stood up immediately and went and notified the Swamiji of their arrival. He instructed me to serve their needs. I opened and cleaned the rooms they would use, showed one of them the bathrooms, and made arrangements for their requirements to be purchased in the market close by.

But in the evening I again went and sat on that bench, where I usually spent my spare moments in the Sevashram. It had become my comrade through fair weather and foul, my corner for dreaming. Whenever my work was finished I would sit there instead of in my room upstairs.

I still intended to leave the Sevashram the next morning, and as I sat there I rehearsed what I would say to the Swamiji.

With a bundle of lighted incense sticks in his hand, the Brahmachari from Gaya walked through the Swamiji's and other rooms. In a low voice he was softly singing:

"Deep inside my heart there is this Shyam[4]
And outside also is this Shyam;
Shyam exists in the waters of this Yamuna.
Below lies this Shyam,
And above also lies this Shyam;
Shyam pervades the Whole blue sky."

"Āmār antare a Shyām, Bahire a Shyām,
Shyām a Jamunā jale.
Adhare a Shyām, Uradhe a Shyām,
Shyām a Nilnavatale."

I was listening quitly. I thought the Brahmachari would not see me sitting in that dark corner, and that I could listen unobserved to the innermost prayer of this renunciant. But no. He had the eyes of a cat; even in that darkness he recognised me. Seeing me, his singing stopped all of a sudden. He started reproaching me:

"What are you doing, sitting here in the darkness? I've been waiting all day to have a private word with you. Where have you been?"

"I've been looking for you too," I said as I got up.

"Why? Why? What's the matter? I heard that you are leaving! It can't be so, can it? Because I was relying on you... I could go to Gaya and you..."

"Yes, my brother. You must forgive me. It is my destiny that I cannot stay in this Sevashram in spite of your love and affection for me. I'm leaving tomorrow, positively."

"But why? What has gone wrong?"

As with the Swamiji, the Brahmachari's voice also was filled with great care and concern.

"Nothing has gone wrong at the ashram," I answered. "It is I who made a mistake in coming here, and now I need to correct that error."

"But why so hurry-scurry? It's scarcely fifteen days that you have been here. Why not stay a few days more and give this place a chance? I'm sure that your present inconvenience and dissatisfaction will soon vanish. After all, you won't be staying in Brindavan forever. As soon as this construction-project is finished, we'll go back to Gaya and you'll also come with us. And once there, Swamiji will initiate you, as he has initiated us..."

"No, my brother!" I stopped him, "That is impossible! I have to go!"

The Brahmachari sympathetically continued, "Oh, you're impossible! Don't you know when you're well off? What kind of a person are you to laugh in the face of this good fortune? When I first arrived I underwent all sorts of ordeals. We all have to go through this period. I was on trial for a year here, and with others it has been the same story. If anyone is unable to sustain this kind of trial, he may go away, no one will persuade him. But you...from the moment you arrived, you were given everything! Aren't you aware of the interest that Swamiji has taken in you, and the affection he has for you? He even noticed that you are wearing only one banian and shivering with the cold...in the last few days he has instructed me to get warm clothes and bedding for you from the market. It was only because I hadn't yet found time to go there. That was why..."

"No, Brahmachari brother. I have no more need of them. I'm leaving early tomorrow morning. What more can I say? Such a secure and happy shelter is not meant to be mine.A beggar's life is my lot. And if I stay here, that begging door to door will not be possible. When you see me pass by your front gate, going from chhatra to chhatra, you will have proof of my words!"

Realising that there was nothing more to be said, the Brahmachari responded in a hurt voice: "All right! I will go and tell Swamiji that you are definitely leaving tomorrow morning....so much for my trip to Gaya!"

I was helpless. There was nothing I could do for the Brahmachari. But I felt relieved that now it was not necessary to go to the Swamiji. The Brahmachari went straight to him, informing him of my decision.

Early the next morning I went and said good-bye to the Swamiji of Brindavan. I had never discussed my leaving with him, and of course it was not necessary because I had been under the tutelage of the Swamiji of Gaya, and whatever decisions he had taken concerning me were not interfered with.

And yet he knew everything that had taken place...even that I was to depart this very morning. After pranam I stood up and he said, "So, you're leaving right away? Hold on a minute..."

Saying this he disappeared into an adjoining room.

The day I had arrived there, I had given him my remaining seventy or eighty paise, telling him to use it towards my upkeep. But up to now there had been no expenditure on me... and it was just as well: otherwise my sense of obligation to them might have seemed insurmountable, and I would not have felt so free to go away from their sevashram.

The Swamiji returned with those very same coins, saying,

"Here, take this and your books as well."

Since I was leaving, they saw no reason to keep the books. But I insisted, "Please Swamiji, keep these books at least."

However, he put them aside.

Then I went to the Swamiji of Gaya. As usual he was sitting in the courtyard, supervising the construction work. On seeing me he said,

"Hello, my boy! Are you really leaving? Where is the Brahmachari? He wanted you to stay here in his place while he went to Gaya. This happens with whoever comes to the Sevashram - he wants to hold on to those he is fond of. Poor fellow!"

And the Swamiji began to laugh aloud - Ha-ha-ha-ha!

But I felt that his laughter was forced, and the pain in my heart was almost more than I could bear. To help me break this bond of affection that had developed between us, and to make my departure easier, I said, "But you don't know how much I look forward to the search for a greater happiness than I have ever yet secured here. When you see me in the coming days going from chhatra to chhatra you will get the proof of it..."

But the Swamiji understood my words differently, and said,

"Then why are you going? Who is asking you to beg from place to place? Stay here just a few more days and see how you feel by then!"

"No, no, Swamiji, please don't insist. If I stay here any longer my sense of wrong doing will only increase. I now understand that I should never have come here to begin with... please forgive me!"

The Swamiji suddenly switched to a very different approach. He asked me suddenly,

"Well, boy, do you call that 'foreign lady' your Mother?"

At first I felt shocked by his question. Was he referring to my japa of 'Ma, Ma' within myself? But how could he know? I had never spoken of it to any of them. Then as I was about to ask him about this, I remembered: Ah yes! That very first day, I had told him that my village people had returned from Pondicherry saying that 'The Mother' was not accepting new people just now. He must have been referring to that. And then I realised immediately what he meant by that 'foreign lady'. I answered him,

"Yes, Sir, I certainly do call her 'Ma'. Why shouldn't I call the Mother 'Ma'? What is wrong with that? We make all kinds of deities out of clay and stone and worship them as 'Mother,' don't we? And if we can worship statues of clay and stone, then where is the wrong, Swamiji, in calling a woman of flesh and blood 'Mother,' though she may be a foreign lady?

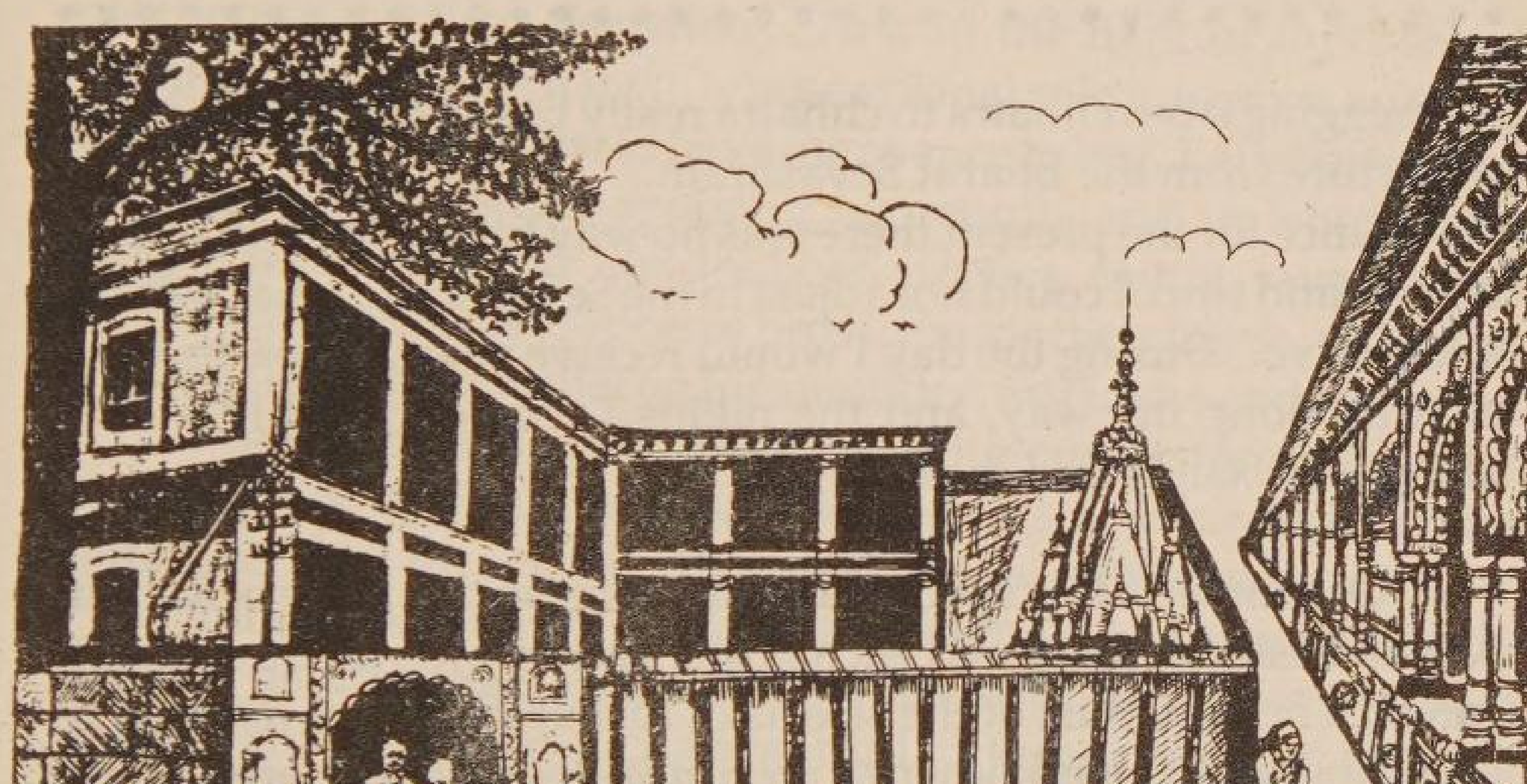
"In fact, Swamiji, I have never seen the Mother of the Ashram with my own eyes, yet still I perceive that I have seen her so many times in so many different forms. I have felt her presence on many occasions. I even feel her to have been my mother through countless lives. Speaking of the Mother, my whole being is alive.....look, all the hairs on my body are standing on end!"

So many words I uttered, but none of them penetrated the Swamiji's consciousness. By then his attention had turned back to the masons, he was giving them further instructions.

The Swamiji of Brindavan was also busy, in his room. In the Sevashram, people such as me were often arriving and departing.

If they had concerned themselves unduly with this process it would have interrupted the flow of their lives.

But the Brahmacharis were both new to these things, and thus more easily affected. My last view of the Sevashram as I walked out of the front gate, was of both the Brahmacharis standing on the verandah, looking with pity upon this man, who of his own will was going out to beg in the streets once more!



Note and References

1. Charitable organisations.
2. Meghdoot means 'The Cloud-Messenger'; it is a famous poem by Kalidas. it tells of Yoksha, who is exiled in the Ramgiri mountain, while his lady-love is far away in Alokapuri. He sends a message to her with the clouds.
3. The Golden Boat, by Rabindranath Tagore.
4. Shyam: Sri Krishna whose complexion is a deep luxuriant green.

Chapter Five

My begging from chhatra to chhatra really began on the day of my departure from the Bharat Sevashram.

Since for the present there was no way for me to go to Pondicherry, and since I could not adjust in the Sevashram, what was the alternative? During the day I would receive a few chapattis from chatras along my way, and the nights I would spend in a cave along with saints and sadhus.

Of course, in this special land, in this gracious place of Radha-Krishna, each activity and each object had its own unique significance. The very dust of the streets of Brindavan is not referred to as ordinary dirt - it is known as *prem-roja*—love-dust! Here a house is not just a building, but a *kunja*, meaning grove or garden, where Rahda-Krishna play their divine games: one house was named Rai-kunja, or Radha's groves and another Shyām-kunja - Krishna's garden; and there were Lalita-kunja, Dhir-Samire-kunja and many others. So too, even begging has a special name in Brindavan ... no one calls it begging. The Swamiji at the Bharat Sevashram had referred to it as begging, because he was annoyed with me and intended to put me down; otherwise, nobody calls it begging. Everybody calls it *madhukari*, which means 'the collecting of honey'. And here honey is understood to represent the grace of Radha and Krishna. So to beg in Brindavan is literally the active gathering-in of the Divine's grace, just as a bee flies from flower to flower, collecting honey. Here, the one who begs, or does madhukari, has his pride dissolved ... begging is understood to help break down one's pride: feelings of contempt towards those lower than oneself vanish. All sense of shame, all hatred and sense of ego is destroyed, thus preparing one's mind and body to become fit for *nitya-lila*—the eternal play of the Divine. And one who gives food, or rather responds to the person 'collecting honey', is symbolically offering the food not to the beggar, but to Radharani - to the Divine herself in the guise of a beggar. Therefore, here in Brindavan, neither the one who gives nor the one who receives is great or small, neither is rich nor poor; both are equal in the eyes of the Divine, and both receive the Divine's blessings.

Because of this, begging here does not have the shameful connotation that it has elsewhere. And in the light of this special significance, even rich men, whose normal role is to give, will don the robes of the poor just to have the chance to beg. Lala-Babu, who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and in whose own temple hundreds and hundreds of ascetics, saints, savants and Vaishnava mendicants receive provision for their meals, would go out begging with a wallet on his shoulder, just for a handful of rice!

Begging here is a part of *tapasya* - religious austerity. It serves both soul and body at the same time; on one side it is 'yoga' - union with God; and on another, it is also 'bhoga' - enjoyment.

But no one should think that I am going to be permanently dressed as a beggar, and that as sheer justification for my own actions, I have painted such a beautiful picture of begging. No,sirs! Not at all. I have described the situation as it truly exists in Brindavan.

You can't believe all this? You want proof?

All right, I will try to give some proof. Perhaps you belive in the literary men of our age ... shall we take examples from them? Many a writer is aware of this fact. If not, why have they sent most of the stranded and succourless heroes and heroines of their stories by train to Kashi or Brindavan, giving them no more than tickets for the journey in their hands? Why didn't they think of how they would survive there? And how can it be accidental when it happens over and over again? I can say with certainty, that it was in expectation of begging. For instanc^, call to mind Kamal Latā of *Srikānto*, Priyanāth Mukherjee, Sandhyā and Jnānoda of *Bāmuner Meye*, Braja Behāri and Renuka of *Shesher Parichay* - or Annapurna and Benodini of Rabindranath's *Chokher Bāli*. There are many such instances: Annadā-didi in *Srikānto*, Brindāvan and Kusum of *Pandit Mashāi* and Rāikamal of *Rāikamal* [1]— perhaps they too repaired to Brindavan.

And these are only a few of the many examples of this phenomenon available to us. Because of the difficulties and injustices of ordinary life, these characters leave their home environments and come to Brindavan to find peace and perhaps some answers to their problems; and through this process of begging, although not in the dress of the ascetic, they find themselves making an inner progress and in fact undergoing sadhaha. Sometimes, for a particular person, the practice of this occupation becomes unavoidable. Tell me then, if there were not something unique about begging here, why would all these authors bother sending their characters to Brindavan?

It is interesting that these writers never mention why their heroes and heroines go to Brindavan, nor what they do there. I think there is a reason for this: one may call begging *kripa madhukari*, but unless one has experienced the process here oneself, then madhukari is nothing but begging like anywhere else in India, and there is no sense of madhukari associated with it. In that sense, to the sceptical, it is nothing but mean begging. Lest the sceptics should wrinkle their noses in contempt, the writers would conceal that idea from public sight. Or maybe, they thought that if it were known that free food was available in Kashi and Brindavan very easily, every loafer, beggar and good-for-nothing would crowd there from all over the whole world! Perhaps that was the reason why these writers adoped these cautious steps.

Of course, their caution was not wholly effective. The very fact that they sent their heroes and heroines to Kashi and Brindavan in that way has drawn many to these places, as I shall show later on.

But enough of delineating begging. Let me come to the point:

At the moment I left the Bharat Sevashram, I regained all—again I felt the contact of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo within me. Although I had been living in Brindavan, I had lost my contact with it too, on account of my mental conflict ... now I regained Brindavan also. But at the same time, I had to forget Pondicherry. Was it feasible to go to Pondicherry in those circumstances? So I had to forget Pondicherry. I consoled myself by saying:

"There are so many people in the world ... if they all wanted to be in Pondicherry, how would it be possible? And the Mother might not be pleased with such a crowd. So if I am not able to stay in Pondicherry, what is the harm? After all, the Divine is in Brindavan as well. Is there any difference between Sri Aurobindo and Sri Krishna? Didn't Ramprasad sing:

"You see a difference between Shyām and Shyāmā (Kāli).
Even though you have eyes, how blind you are!"

With these words in my mind I felt at peace with myself - as though I would be able to stay in Brindavan forever.

In another regard too, it was good that I left the Sevashram ... for otherwise I might never have understood this *madhukari* performance, even though I was living in Brindavan.

There, there are so many permanent chhatras where a square meal is available ... I mean, where one can eat one's fill; and in addition, Brajabasis too offer madhukari in their homes. It's not like in our home village, where the woman of the house will brush one aside, saying, "Don't bother me, I'm busy - go to some other house!" or the man of the house will blurt out, "Can't you work for your food?"

No! Here it is enough to simply stand on the doorstep and praise the name of Radha, saying - "Jai Radhe Radhe!" - that's all. Female Brajabasis whole drop their many chores and come running to offer madhukari to 'madhukars' - to performers of madhukari.

And what they give is not just any sort of madhkari ! They don't just contemptuously and haphazardly cast into the beggar's wallet half a handful to avoid his touch. Not at all ! A hot *mughlai parotta* (a rich dough fried in clarified butter) together with some vegetable dish or cooked *chola* (a nutritious legume) or a little molasses ... and with it a warm reception, a 'please come and take your seat' attitude - as if not the performer of madhukari, but Sri Krishna himself has come to their home!

But will people from other places be able to believe me? They will say I'm axaggerating, I'm just writing a made-up story. That's why I suggest to you all—please go there once to see for yourself how they love and how they live in the 'Land of Love' !

Of course, there is one point to be borne in mind: all these arrangements are meant for ascetics, saints and Vaishnava holy men. It is only to serve them that there are so many contributing homes, so many chhatras, shrines, ashrams and monasteries. It is in order to receive their grace that rich merchants spend lakhs of rupees in chhatras and in the dead of night place new cloths, blankets and kamandalus at the sides of sleeping sadhus and ascetics. Ascetics who sleep in the streets or in caves or beneath trees find new kamandalus near their heads, new cloths and blankets upon their bodies when they awake at daybreak - their simple needs have been fulfilled by Radharani.

And for those are not ascetics, there are other chhatras, where beggars, orphans and others as well can receive a chapatti and some cooked pulse. If blankets and clothes are left over after distribution to the ascetics and monks, these too are distributed to them in the winter season ... So orphans, destitutes and beggars also manage to survive here somehow.

I too survived. Of course, it was not my lot to eat mughlai parotta with vegetable and pulse for more than one day; but nevertheless I survived. As I said, these things were intended for ascetics, saints and Vaishnava holy men. Since I am none of these, why should I receive what is meant for them? Moreover I had no hankering after such food. But there are many chhatras where a newcomer is served first of all - be he ascetic, householder or beggar. So a few days elapsed in this way, with me enjoying the care and warm reception offered to a new guest. Later, when my welcome wore thin by degrees as the days passed by, when I became an old resident of Brindavan, then only 'retail chhatras' remained for my sustenance.

I call them 'retail chhatras' because a whole meal, to fill the stomach, is not offered there; the helpings are meagre: a piece of bread and some cooked pulse is given. In these places, all classes of people--ascetics, Vaishnavs, beggars and householders -all get equal treatment and equal food.

I would go to five or six of these retail chhatras, and obtain five or six pieces of bread and cooked pulse to keep myself alive. So in fact, what is really meant by true madhukari fell to my lot ... for in the madhukari system, excessive receiving - that means, more than a handful of rice or bread - is prohibited; one has to conquer greed and the propensity to fulfil one's cravings. An ascetic can receive a full meal, even at one house, but Vaishnava scripture will not call that madhukari.

Of course, some people may not consider my living in this way, by relying on genuine madhukari, living at all ! Perhaps there will be many who cannot believe that I actually lived like that: that I ate only what I received from those chhatras, and slept on the damp floor of a cave without any bedding in the cold of Brindavan - they might doubt that anyone could actually live like that.

But I repeat to you that in truth I did live in that way, and that I was very happy and content. In fact, the sun rose and the sun set, and the days rolled by without number. Each day I would walk the same streets, eat routinely the same bread and cooked pulse and pass the night in the cave of the ascetics. But this routine seemed to me not a bit monotonous; never did it occur to me, not even once, whether it was practicable to pass my whole life like that or not. Rather, the happiness I felt gave me the sense that I would be able to go on in the same way for hundreds of eras. The inmost core of my heart was full to the brim with an unknown delight. Constantly these words arose in my mind:

"Oh Sweet! How sweet thou art,
Thou king of sweetness !
And sweet too the Brindavan
Where thou dost always abide !"

Madhukari distribution at the chhatras generally ended by eleven or twelve o'clock in the morning. After that I would take whatever food had been given to me to the bank of the Yamuna, where I would sit and savour each morsel with great relish. With my last coins, I had purchased an aluminium *lota* (container) with a lid. I would put my food in this container, and processed to the bank of the Yamuna through two particular lanes, named 'Dangoli' and 'Mangoli'. This was my daily route to the river. The last chhatra was situated in this direction, so to go to the Yamuna after visiting the chhatras, this path was convenient.

But it was more than just convenient; I was very much attracted to these lanes because of their names.[2] What a sweetness they held for me! Some people might call it nothing but sheer nonsense ... but what to do? My eyes and ears are like that: they get overwhelmed by any little sweetness of name or appearance! I still remember an incident that happened in Mathura Jail:

In our barracks there was a young prisoner from Bombay city. He was a bit off-balance. On both ankles and wrists he was bound by thick iron chains. Yet he would hold up his manacled hands and start singing and dancing like Srimati - a legendary female devotee of the Lord Buddha:

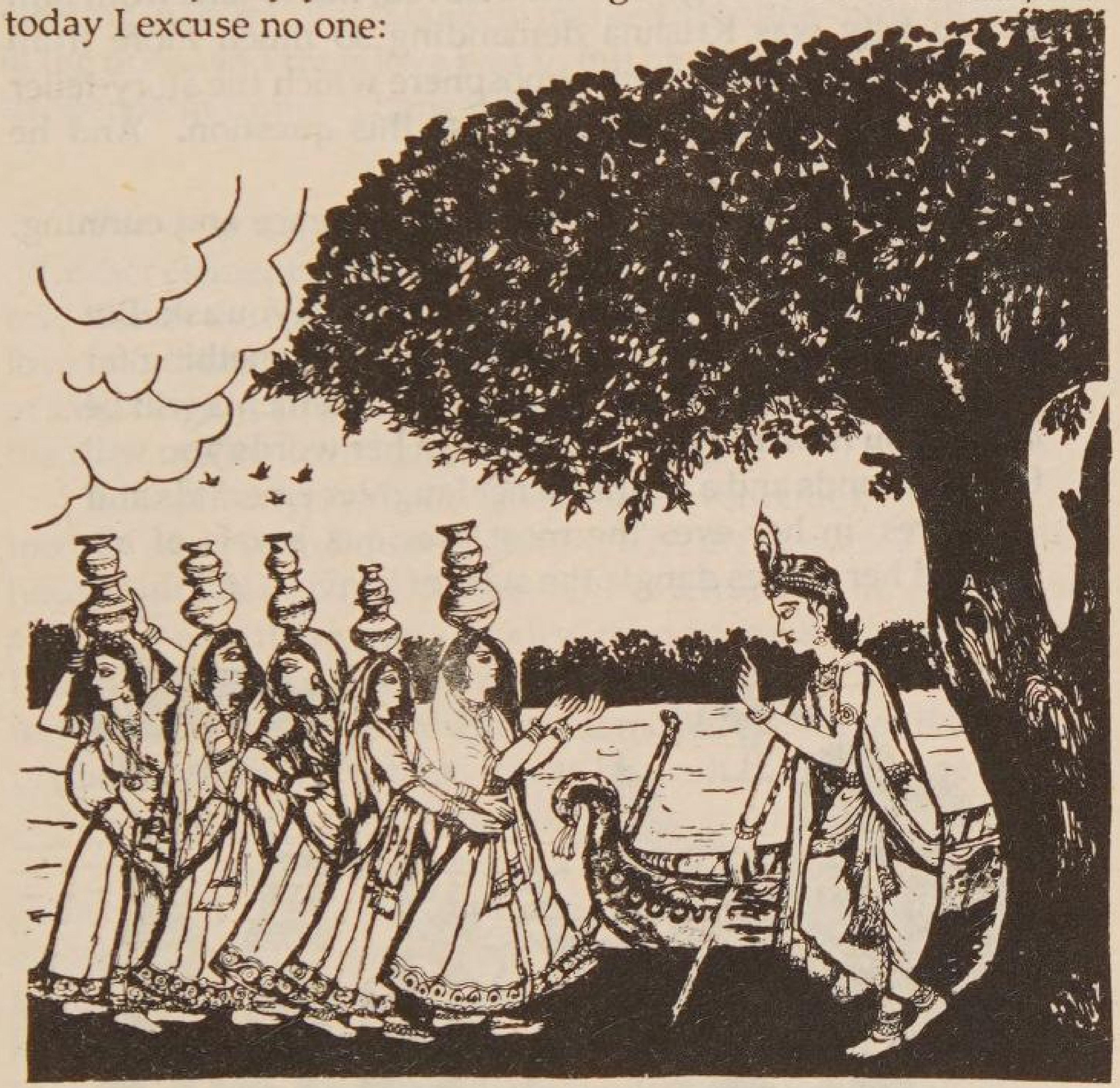
"Oh-o-o-o Bolungi!
Oh Bolungi! (Oh, I shall say ... Oh, I shall say...)"

I don't know what he would say; it was a very common place Hindi song, and had a very ordinary tune ... yet his voice rings in my ears even now, I cannot forget it completely. This is the way my ears respond to special sounds.

As soon as I heard the names of those two lanes from the Brajabasis, I began to see their beauty in my inner eyes; the words of Bhuban Moira's *kirtan* song[3] - returned to my memory. I remembered Bhuban Moira, singing in "The Act of Donation", and how, in the midst of the assembly he would sing at the top of his voice:

"Hear, Oh hear, what I say, Townswomen!
It is the law on this charitable ferry of mine
That if married ladies come here,
They must pay a price to cross ...."

This carried my thoughts back to the Brindavan of old: It was somewhere in this very lane that there had been a landing-dock. And down this very lane Radha and her fellow-milkmaids used to come every day with their pots of milk, curd, buttermilk and ghee piled one on top of the other, to take a ferry to Mathura. One day Krishna disguised himself as a ferryman, and called out to them, "Every day you cheat the king of the fare due to him, but today I excuse no one:



To ferry you friends I shall take from each one a silver coin;
But to ferry Radha, I shall take the gold earrings from
each of her ears."

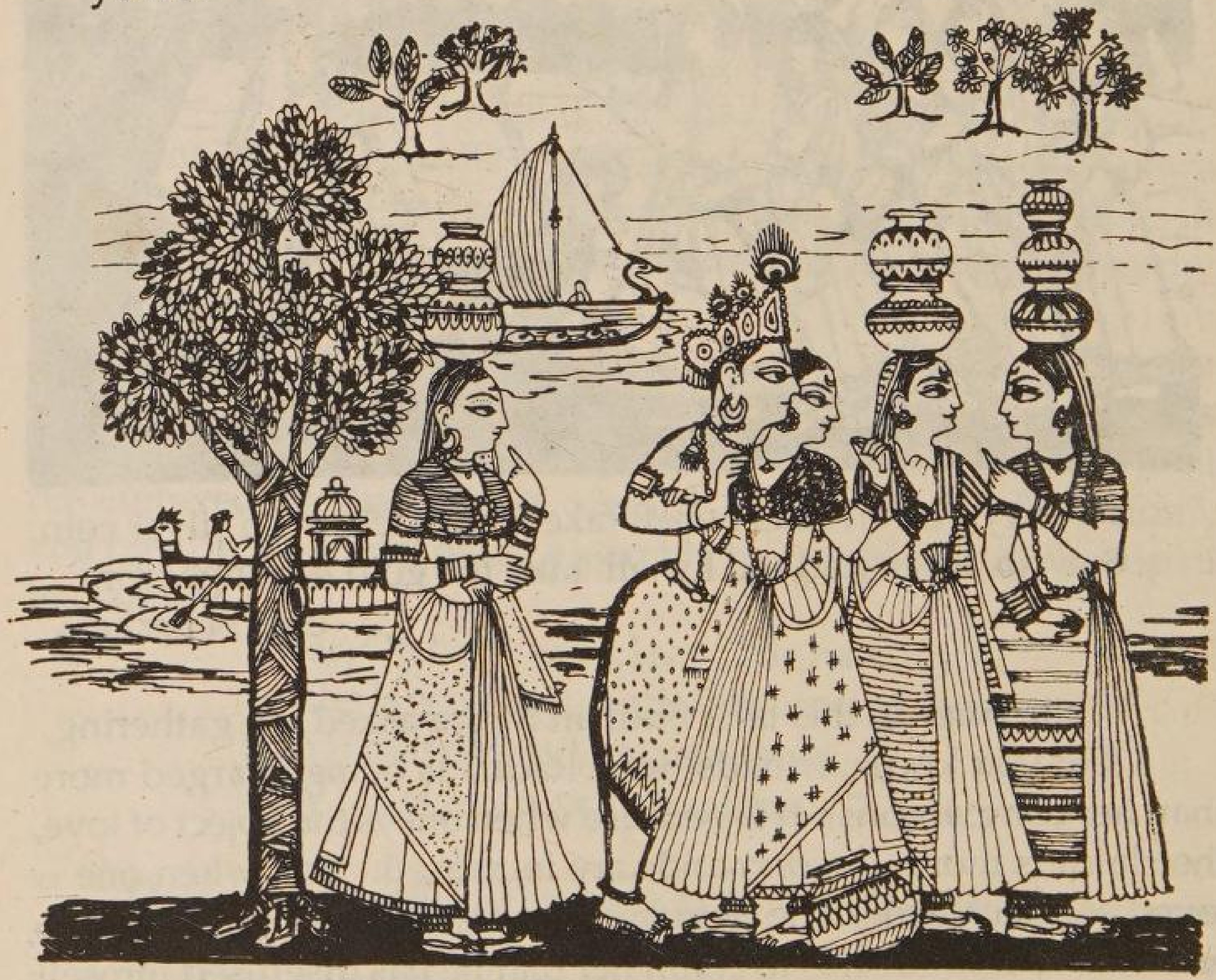
While singing this tale, Bhuban Moira asked the gathering,

"Do you know, friends, why Radha is being charged more than her companions? It is because when one is the object of love, the claim is more, the demands are increased. Yes, when one is loved so much more, the demands are also more. Here, Krishna wants only Radha. It is to claim her that he has disguised himself as the tollman of this ferry and asks so much more from her than from the others ...."

When I first heard Bhuban Moira sing this in my village could not accept what he said. We usually think that when one loves, one only cares to give to the beloved, not to take from him or her; so why was Krishna demanding so much more from Radha? But in the entrancing atmosphere which the story-teller move that day, no one thought to ask this question. And he continued singing:

"Then, taking to heart Sri Krishna's pretence and cunning, one of Radha's companions answers Krishna:

> 'O most clever of the clever! We'll give you all you ask. But why are you asking only gold and silver? Something far more precious is awaiting you. All arrangements will be made, You have only to accept her! In her words you will find diamonds and a pearls, in her laughter emeralds and sapphires, in her eyes the most precious jewels of all. Around her ankles dangle the stars of heaven. All this is yours.



> Come now, O clever one, take us quickly across.
> The day proceeds and the curd will soon spoil."

Now before this incident, Radha and Krishna had been meeting in secret. But this event marked a change - now all was out in the open, and their love was in full bloom. This is said to have happened in Dangoli Lane itself.

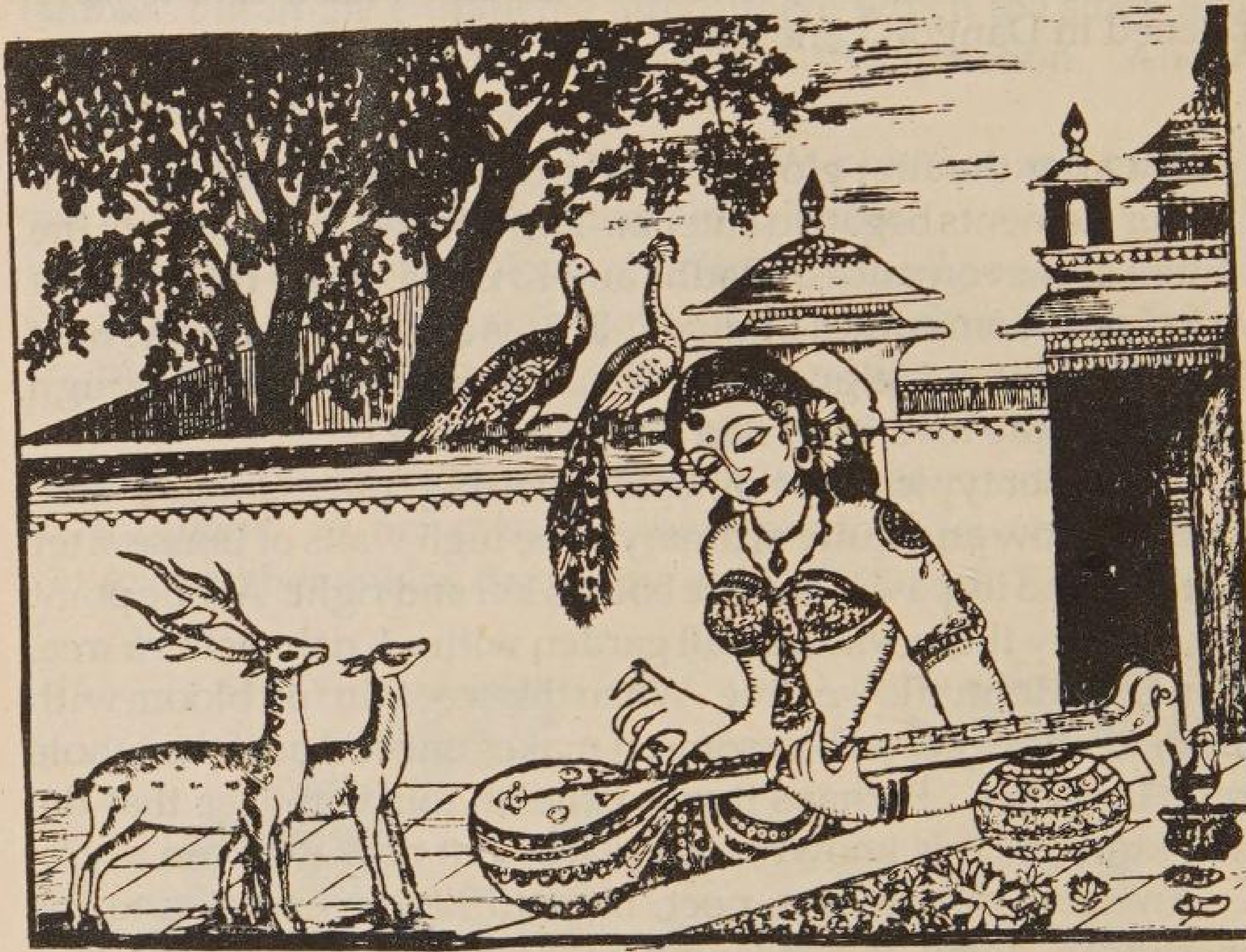
But after the first glow of newly-discovered love had worn off, other elements began to enter in. There are further stages in the tradition of the romance of Radha and Krishna. After this stage of love in full-bloom comes Mangoli. This is a time of jealousy, hurt at small slights, and feigned anger coming to the surface, although the depth of the love itself had not changed.

Like other typical side-lanes found in big cities, Mangoli Lane too was narrow and quite ordinary. The high walls of house after house touched its paved surface both to left and right. At one point along the way there was a small garden with a Krishnachura tree, I mean Gul-Mohur flower tree. When this tree is in full bloom with its myriad crimson-red blossoms, it makes one feel as if the whole garden is on fire. Perhaps it was beneath this very tree that the Basak-kunja, as it is known, took place - but now who can say?

Anyway, our singing poet, Bhuban Moira, explains to the gathering in detail the meaning of *Basak-kunja*. A kunja is a carefully-tended grove of trees. In the chronicles of Krishna, *basak-kunja* refers to the famous grove in which Sri Krishna chose to have his rendezvous with Radha. She would go there to meet him. Upon her arrival, she would lovingly decorate this gardern spot with garlands of flowers and other pretty things, and then sit down to wait with the small thoughtful gifts she had brought to present to her Lord. And thus she waited, counting each moment until the arrival of her beloved.

Oh, the expectation! But she waited in vain. Hour after hour slipped by, until night began to fade in the first hours of dawn. The flower-garland in her hands became limp. At last she threw away her flower-wreath and sat down with her Veena to console herself.

Then, at last, Sri Krishna appeared. Till now she had been musing to herself, "Dawn has arrived, but Shyam had not yet come!" But upon seeing him she felt hurt. Why was he so late? And her hurt became anger when she learned that he had spent the whole night with Chandravali, another of his devotees, in the kunja![4]



Ah, how everything suddenly changed! She could not contain the anger she felt - the fire of her jealousy burst forth:

"No more will I gaze at your dark face!
Why did you bother to come here?
Go away! Go back to her you love most! "

And here, our bard Bhuban Moira, while singing of their love saga, has become so identified with Radha's feelings that it seems as if it was he himself who had been waiting the whole night for Lord Krishna. But this Radha is not the one who turned away her face from Sri Krishna after he passed the night in Chandravali's house ... No, this is quite a different Radha. Even after such a deception by Sri Krishna, on beholding him she says:

"It's good, O my dear friend,
You have come in the morning;
The day will be passed well,
Since I behold your face at dawn!"

"Yes," continues the poet, "the day will pass well, having begun with you, my Lord; having prepared for your visit with garlands I have eagerly awaited you all through the night. Yes, I did cry bitterly and call for you: 'O Krishna, O beloved, O Lord of my heart !' But when you still did not come I gathered them all together, wilted as they were, and gave them to the river!

"But never mind all this, at least you did come to me. Rather, it is well and good that you have recollected me this morning. Ah! Blessed I am, fulfilled I am! To tell you the truth, all that I went through, I no longer see as suffering. If I'm sure that you will definitely come at the end of all my expectancies, I shall remain waking and watching day after day - I shall repeat last night's preparations every night for the rest of my life.

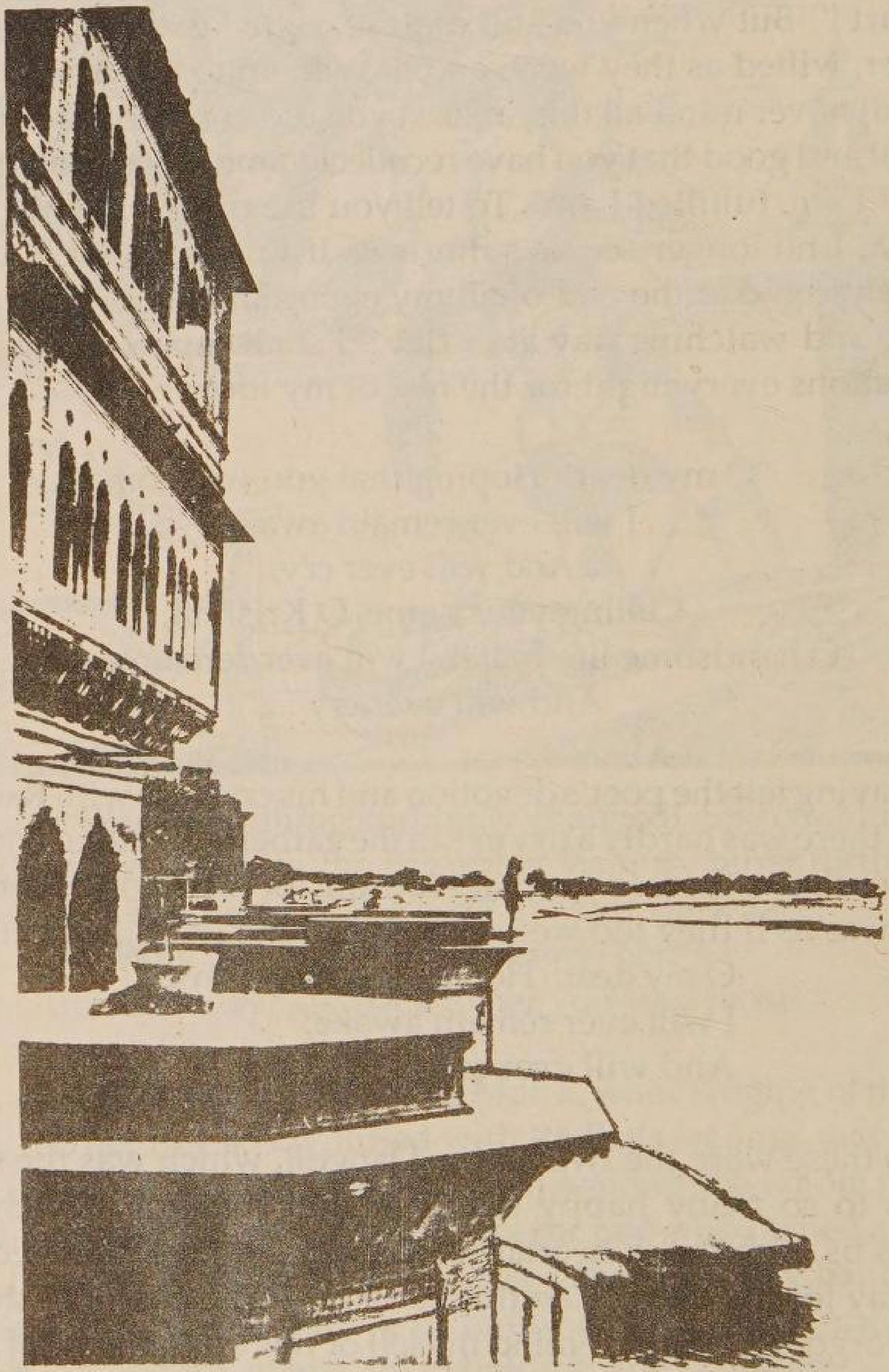
"Ō my dear! Hoping that you will come,
I will ever remain awake,
And will ever cry,
Calling your name, O Krishna,
O handsome life-mate! I will ever remain awake
And will ever cry ...."

Having felt the poet's devotion and his oneness with Radha's prayer, there was hardly a dry eye in the gathering. Along with the singer, each one there felt such a yearning for their Lord's coming. That it was as if they too were chanting along with the poet:

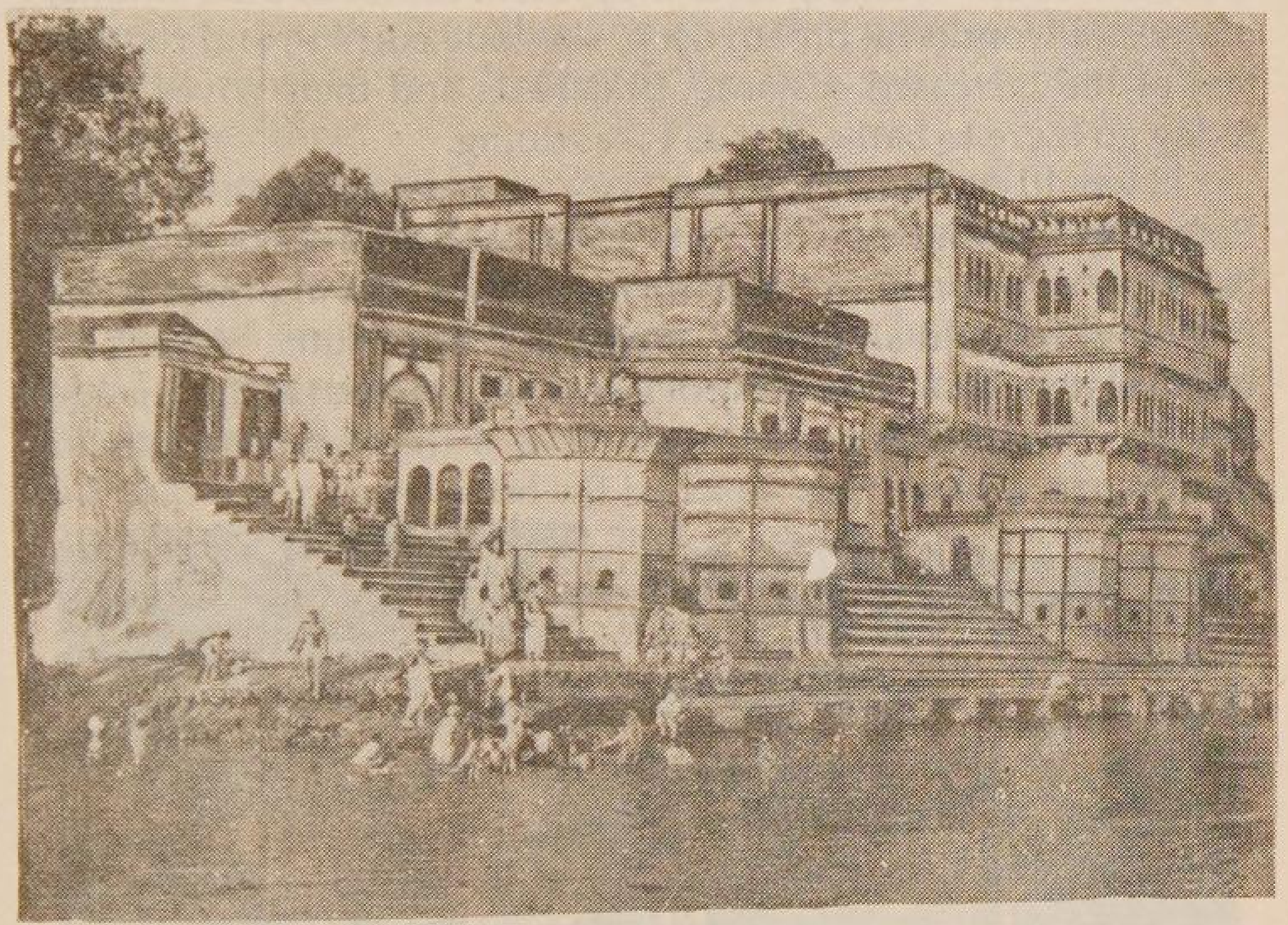
O my dear! Hoping you will come,
I will ever remain awake;
And will ever cry....

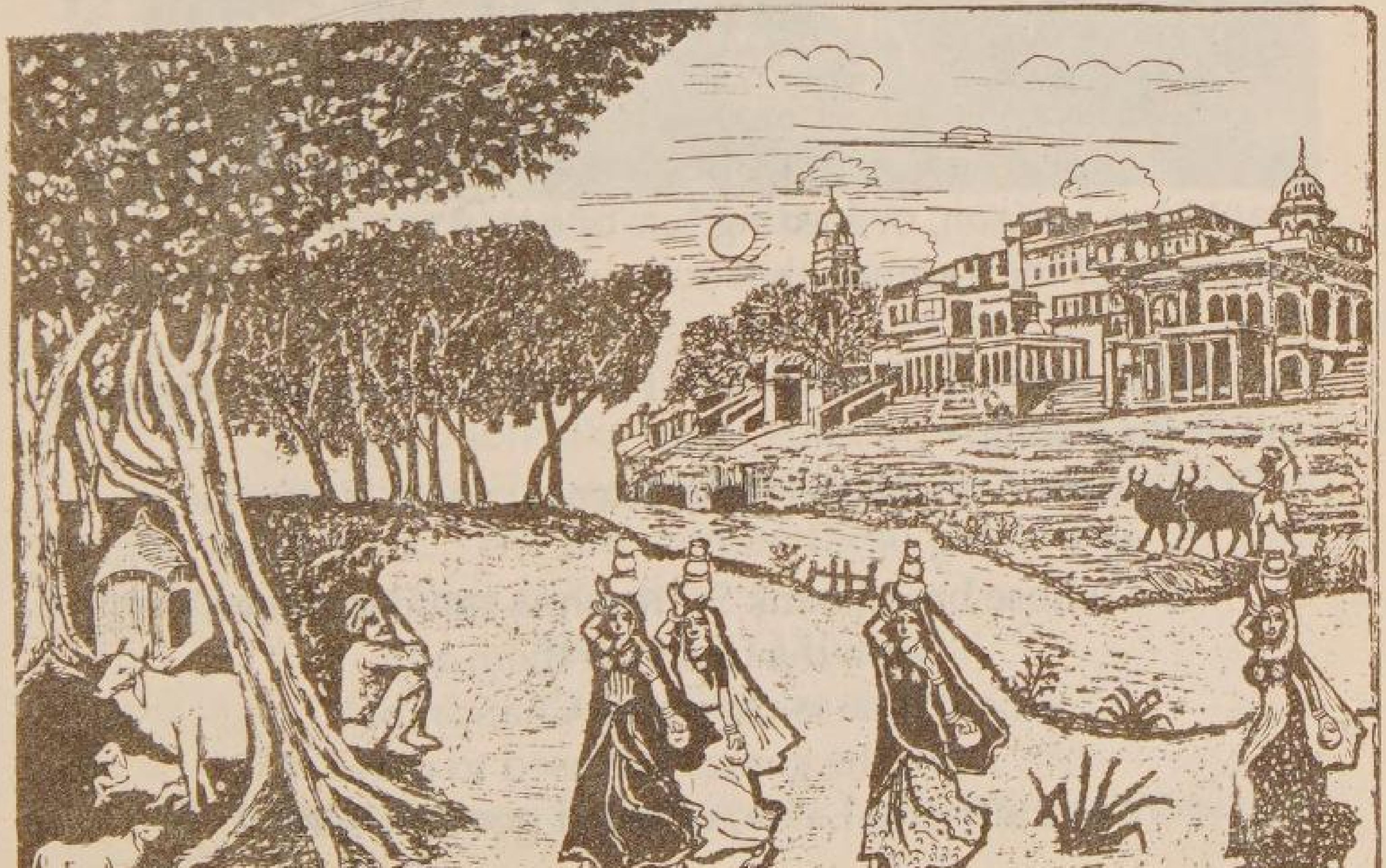
So these were the two lanes: Dangoli, which was the silent witness to so many happy episodes, and Mangoli, which still reminds us of so much heartache, so much waking and weeping every day for the Lord. Can this be easily forgotten? Or, should this be forgotten? So to remind myself of this eternal play of love, I particularly chose to make them a part of my daily routine.

Through the centuries, the Yamuna has changed its course. Now it flows almost a mile away from these lanes. But once it flowed nearby. And the proof of it is still to be seen there. Behind the large houses along the two lanes are broad staircases leading down to the old river-bed. It is the same design that one sees in Ajmeer and Jodhpur, where steps lead down from large palaces that resemble shrines down to the lakes below. The bottom steps were most probably submerged below the surface of the river.



And as soon as the Gopis stepped outside their homes, their feet were in the cool soothing waters of that sacred river.





But these days those steps are half-buried in sand and the remaining ones seem like the ribs of a skeleton. In these former river-beds rich crops are produced: corn, Wheat, barley, sugarcane, and so on. Walking on to the present course of the Yamuna, one sees a wonderful broad, deep, sky-blue current; and regardless of the increased distance, Brajabasis and their wives even today go there to bathe, just as I was doing.

I would stay on this bank of the Yamuna until late afternoon. First I would bathe and pray in its waters, and afterwards sit on the bank to eat my noontime chhatra meal of bread and pulse. After finishing, I would sit quietly gazing at the Yamuna. Across its broad waters, a faint blue line of trees could be seen at the far side of some distant village ... it seemed as if that faint line would continue on into infinity. I passed the hours gazing into that distant blue horizon, or feeding bits of bread to the tortoises and wild ducks of the Yamuna that occasionally caught my attention.

There were also times when I would find myself singing a familiar Baul song:

O Yamuna! Are you the same stream of that Yamuna
river?
On whose broad bank Sri Krishna came to dance
with the fairest of them all?
Where then is charming Chandrabali
with the games she used to play?
Where's friend Lalita, with her good laughter?

And where's he who played the flute
with dear Radha at his side?

In this way my afternoons would pass. When the cowherds began their evening journey home from the pastures, I too would leave the river bank to return to the Gopinath temple for the Bhagavat reading.

In Calcutta I had heard the same text together with *kirtan* - a musical accompaniment praising the Lord's name. But here it was of a far superior type. As soon as the Vaishnava reader arrived to seat himself on the raised platform, women from the audience would come forward to wash his feet, wiping them first with their hair and afterwards with the ends of their saris. Then they would garland him.

This is a traditional welcome given to these readers of the Bhagavat.

Then the reader would in his turn welcome the listeners by chanting hymns to them, and the devotees would ardently respond in chorus:

"Hari bol, Hari Bol! Jai Gour-Nityananda!" And throughout the reading they would continue at times to repeat the same kind of response.

These readers know very well how to capture the minds of their audience. At the very beginning of the reading, they chant a Sanskrit verse from the Bhagavat:

"Tadashmasārang hṛidayang vatedang,
Yadgṛihamānairharināmadheyaiḥ!"

This means:

> "The heart which does not melt, even after hearing the repeated name of Hari (God), is like a stone - or perhaps more like iron - you know this as a fact."

On hearing this, it becomes difficult for the audience to restrain their tears. The emotion of these gatherings becomes overwhelming, as they cry out:

"O Radhe! O Govinda!
Have mercy on us!"

When the session ends, both reader and audience move on to another session in another place. There the *Gopigeet*, or Song of the Gopis, might be recited. This text is also one of extraordinary beauty - he who has never heard it, cannot imagine its sweetness.

As I sat there listening amidst male and female Vaishnavas, I could actually have the vision of Radha-Krishna's play, played out in their earthly existence in Brindavan, as if before my very eyes!

At the end of these session I would visit yet another temple, the Govindaji Mandir. I had heard that Govindaji's evening *arati*, or light-worship, was a thing worth seeing. I would stand in the inner sanctum of the temple, watching that worship of the deity. On evenings when no readings were held I would spend the whole afternoon sitting in the portico of the temple. Then, on completion of the evening worship, I would wander through the streets of the city until it was time to return to the cave to sleep.

Before me lay the deserted streets, above me the silent countenances of numberless stars in an endless sky kept watch; and from some adjacent temple or Vaishnava assemblage a wave of music would come drifting:

"O Krishna, O Madhava!
My repeated earnest request to you...
Please don't leave me!"

Then I could feel the whole of silent Brindavan aspiring to some mysterious presence. The trees, the groves, the wind, the entire sky filled with an intense sweetness then !

Note and References

1. Srikānto, Bāmuner Meye, Shesher Parichaya and Pandit Mashāi are all written by Saratchandra; Chokher Bāli is by Rabindranath Tagore; Rāikamal is by Tarasankar Banerjee. All the characters mentioned are either the hero or the heroine of the book - thwarted in love or driven out by the injustice of society or heartless relatives. The authors send all of them either to Kashi or to Brindavan, providing them only with tickets for their journey.

2. These names have come down from the ancient days of Sri Krishna and they carry a special meaning. Dangoli means 'Donation Lane'; it reminds us that once in long ago days some act of donation was performed here. Mangoli means 'Coax and Cuddle Lane' in love-agony and rage.

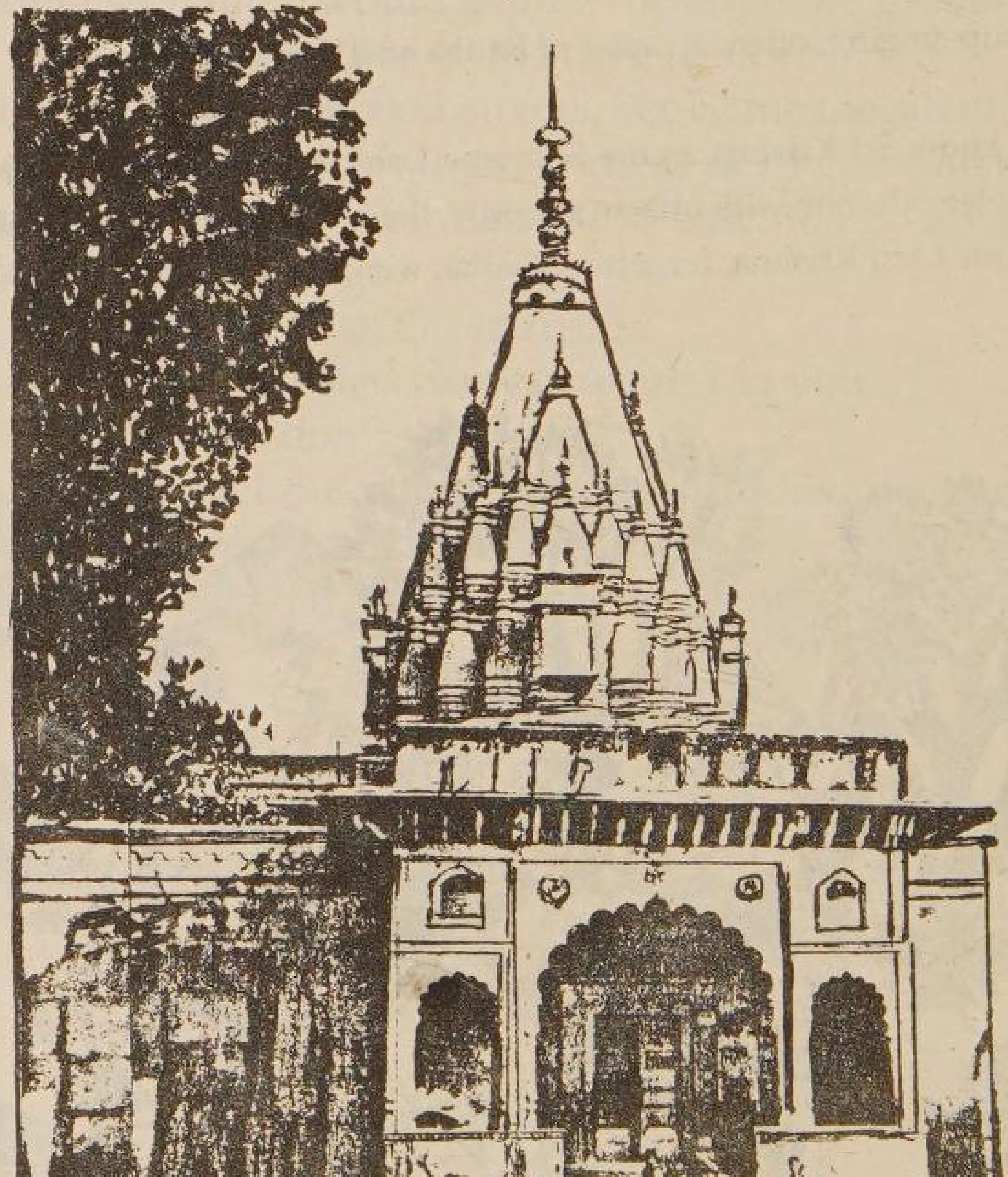
3. Group-singing, often in praise of Radha and Krishna.

4. We know Sri Krishna as the Supreme Lord of the Universe. Whenever a devotee calls him with utmost sincerity, the Lord cannot but go to him or her. So, our Lord Krishna, forgetting Radha, went to Chandravali's kunja.

Chapter Six

One of my maternal uncles asked me recently, "Nephew, you stayed for a long time in Brindavan. Did you ever see a golden palm tree there?"

I looked at him incredulously:



"A golden palm tree in Brindavan?"

"Yes, didn't you see a golden palm tree in the temple of Lala Babu?"

"No, I didn't."

"My goodness! Everyone else sees it when they go there. Why didn't you?"

"Perhaps it is because I am different from the others - that's why I have not seen what everybody sees."

"Excuses, excuses! It sounds to me as if you spent your whole time there thinking only of your stomach.....where and in which chhatra you could find rice, where you could get bread, which chhatra to try next and so on. It seems that you missed the really important things to see and do there!"

I replied, "No, Uncle. You're wrong. Of course, I did consider my stomach there. But I did not spend my whole time worrying about that. If I had gone there only for food, surely I would have seen the golden palm tree like all the other tourists. Do you think I never entered Lala Babu's temple?"

He asked, "Oh, you did go there?"

"Of course I did...many times I attended the whole puja ceremony and received *prasad* there - but I never saw a golden plam tree. Are you speaking of a life-size palm tree all in gold? Certainly not!"

At length my maternal uncle agreed with me: "It's exactly as you said. Unless someone points the golden palm tree out to a person, they will not recognise it as such. There's high dome, on both sides of which two branches extend; people say the dome is coated with gold plating......and the priests point out that dome as the golden palm tree....."

"Good God! Say that again please! I never went through the temples there with tourist guides, so who would have shown me the golden palm tree?"

I very often passed groups of tourists at the Kaliya bathing place, where Krishna killed the poisonous snake Kaliya. There used to be a series of steps leading down to the water of the river, but now there is no water at the bottom. It's dry. Nowadays it only collects a little water there after a heavy rain. And yet people come to visit this spot, for the memory of what happened there. They would sit on the cement steps above bathing place, the *pandas*, or guides, would make them perform worship of Sri Krishna, and then they would encourage the tourist party to give offerings to Sri Krishna. They dramatically narrate at length the tale of what happened there: the spot where Sri Krishna fought with Kaliya Nag and where the Victory celebration was performed when all of his friends gathered there to chant hymns praising him. The tourists swallow every word of the pandas charmed by the whole episode, and afterwards proceed to throw coins on the bank of the Yamuna. Then the pandas and nearby beggars gather them up and fold them into their clothing....

But as nobody pointed it out to me, I could not recognise the Kaliya bathing-place at that time. Besides, I did not have the time to see each and every historical detail, because I had set a daily routine for myself. I could not make a single step outside of that routine. But it was a matter of great joy for me, and because I followed it voluntarily, it never became a burden.

Because of this, I lost track of the passage of time there. It wasn't of much interest to me to see much of the historical Brindavan. In fact, I never went beyond the town limits....I did not visit any of the neighbouring villages, such as Gokul, Nandagram, Barsana, Giri Govardhan, Nandhiswar, Akrurtirtha and Panchakoshi Brindavan; I saw none of these. I have bathed in the Yamuna, yet I never knew which bathing-place was Keshi ghat and which was Chir ghat. I spent hour after hour in the Govinda Mandir, yet I never bothered to learn the name of the head-priest there or the founder's name or any other such details.. Nor was I aware then that there are two Govinda Mandirs.

To tell the truth, the urge to learn these things never arose within me. When a person goes on a tour, there is no rest for his eyes, he's always concerned that he might miss something worth seeing! But I had not come to tour, so this kind of anxiety did not affect me. I had come to Brindavan to live there permanently...so where was the hurry to see everything within a day or two?

There was, however, one matter which did cause me considerable concern, and I became really anxious. As I sat on the banks of the Yamuna, I sometime saw dark clouds filling the sky, turning the blue waters of the Yamuna to a murky gray, as if foretelling dark days ahead. And coinciding with this, food difficulties were developing for me, which cast a shadow over the happiness of my stay in Brindavan. In fact there were times when I was unable to get any food at all.

I had thought at first that only a few writers of Bengal and myself knew of the free food at chhatras and the free shelter that was available in Brindavan. But I began to realise that this news had already spread far and wide!

I am speaking of the year 1954, when the influx of refugees into India due to Partition was still in full swing. In spite of a tremendous effort by the Indian Government to deal with the situation, sufficient accomodation for the millions and millions of homeless was impossible to provide. Whenever they could, refugees from both East and West Pakistan would abandon the established refugee camps and flee to any other available shelter. And to Brindavan and Mathura too, refugees streamed unceasingly, taking any possible site they could find. There was no question of choice. In any vacant verandah, a corner of a dharamsala, an unused temple, in tin sheds of railway stations, on vacant land alongside streets, and even under trees, they would set up camp. But in the bone chilling cold of winter, these abodes were very inadequate.

But for food, everyone went to those democratic chhatras. The men would wake up very early, and without bathing or even rinsing out their mouths would rub their eyes as they headed for the chhatras to stand at the gates; and the women, carrying a child on one arm and holding the hand of a second, would follow close behind.

But even these chhatras had their limitations - there was not a simply endless supply of food. Some chhatras would offer food to ten people, some to twenty, some to thirty; but if more guests turned up, the fixed number would be served to those standing nearest to the door, and then the doors would be shut.

Now with this new influx of refugees, the food fell far short of the need; and the refugees began forming queues before the break of dawn, hours before the chhatra doors opened.

I have already mentioned that it was traditional for some chhatras to give preference to newcomers, no matter who they were - anchorites, householders or beggars. But the refugees discovered a way to retain this privilege: they found that if they only visted a chhatra once in ten days, their faces would not be remembered, and they would again be treated as a newcomer. Can the chhatra manager recall whom he has served ten days ago, and whom he has not? There are many chhatras in Brindavan; so it is enough to go here today, and there tomorrow. In this way the refugees soon took control of all the free food available in Brindavan.

But even this method, they found, had its limitations, due to the position of power given to renunciants - I mean, the ascetics, recluses and Vaishnava monks. When one wears the sacred cloth, one is practically above reproach. This is partly due to respect, and much of it is due to fear of yogic power...they can do whatever they wish: the people of the locality will not speak a word against them. so, for how long could the newcomers get the lion's share of the chhatra offerings, driving out the ascetics and recluses?

After observing how things were going for several days, one morning one of the ascetics came forward, blocked the entrance to the refugees, and commanded them, "You people, wait! Please let the sadhu mahatmas and high-souled monks pass first!"

None of the newcomers had the courage to say even one word in reply. Even the manager of the chhatra, who was calling in the guests one by one at the time, kept silent. He merely smiled slightly and retreated within the compound.

Non-ascetics - that means, all those remaining who were not ascetics, monks or sadhus..... even Vaishnavas - took great offence at this interference. For now the ascetic who had spoken out, stood guard at the entrance like a door-keeper, letting only his own kind of ochre-robed monks pass through the doors; after them, if room permitted, he passed the Vaishnavas. But no hope remained for the beggars, orphans and others, at all.

Consequently some of the non-ascetics who were left outside became impatient, and even began to rebel openly against this new system. Ignoring the sadhu standing guard, they began to blame the manager of the chhatra, calling him a fool and demanding:

"Well, whose chhatra is this? Does it belong to the reverend ascetic, or to you, that you let him occupy the door?"

But the reverend ascetic door-keeper paid no head to their objections. Instead he became more and more authoritanian, taking complete control of the selection. After the Vaishnavas, and before any common people were let it, he would slip inside himself and close the door. Then the remaining guests with downcast faces would start to wander away, one by one.

Of course, not everybody went away. There were days when some of those turned away became angry and tried to enter by force, fighting hand to hand and staff to staff with the gate-keeper. Seeing the sadhu being attacked, other sadhus came running to the spot, and the manager of the chhatra also started objecting furiously at the top of his voice. In the long run the sadhu gate-keeper did not suffer - only those who fought were expelled from coming to the chhatras for a few days.

But how long could they suffer this way? They had no other hope than fighting hand to hand with the ascetics ...and even if they did that, they gained nothing. On the other hand, their hunger did not obey. The pinch of their hunger was not less than that of the ascetics. In fact the ascetics had many kinds of advantage and convenience....they could receive madhukari from private homes as well as from the retail chhatras, and they could dine in square-meal chhatras .... there were no rules and regulations about new guests as far as they were concerned.

Of course, they would not like to eat every day in the same place...for who likes to take monotonous food every day? There are chhatras which every day serve a boiled potato and carrot mixture and a rice and dal preparation *(kichuri)* without salt; another serves the same rice and vegetable daily; and the chhatras that give pulse and bread will do only that, for twelve months and thirty days without fail. There is no way for this custom to be altered even slightly, even if the outside world is turned upside down. Those who eat the food never raise their voices to complain about it; after all, it is a gift, and, as the proverb says: "Beggars must not be choosers"! For this reason, with a view to some change of taste, the ascetics do not voluntarily visit the same chhatra day after day.

Anyway, when all the advantages and conveniences enjoyed by the newcomers came to an end, the retail chhatras, which supplied only one piece of bread and a little pulse, were the only remaining hope.

But now these retail chhatras too began all to open simulaneously, at the same hours. They were far apart. It was not practicable for a man to run and join all the queues. If one went to a particular chhatra, the possibility of receiving food from all the others was excluded. So they had to find some other way of acquiring bread in Brindavan.

Within a few days it was found that their number diminished considerably of itself. None of those who formerly used to wait from before dawn in the porticos of the chhatras, on the verandahs of adjacent houses or in the shade of trees by the roadside for the chhatras to open, were now to be seen. Who knows, perhaps they were compelled to go to other sacred places of pilgrimage, because of the inconvenience of obtaining food in Brindavan.

Such things did happen - people went from Brindavan to Mathura for a few days, and going on to Hardwar and Hrishikesh, they passed a few days there.......for there are such chhatras everywhere in west India; there too there was no dearth of facilities for dining and lodging.

One day a man brought a fresh piece of news to us all. He said,

"Early this morning I saw a huge group of people on their way to Mathura. I overheard them mentioning Hardwar and Hrishikesh as they moved......"

On hearing such good news from him, another said,

"That's enough! Now we shan't see them here any more! Surely they are going to Hardwar and Hrishikesh! Let them go, let them see the famous Kali-kamli's chhatras there!"

And another said, "We are relieved now! At least these chhatras of Brindavan will have a few days of respite now."

But in the meantime another phenomena began to occur. The numbers of ascetics, recluses and Vaishnavas were soaring up continuously. At first no one noticed. Everyone at the chhatras was relieved to see that the refugees were not coming any more. When, gradually, the thing was noticed, there was no longer any room even for ascetics and Vaishnavas left....many of them had to turn away like non-ascetics. Then again remarks began to be heard:-

"What a strange thing! Where are all these ascetics and Vaishnavas flooding in from?"

In fact, from day to day, the chhatras were being surrounded by new faces, new ochre-robes and turbans. Now, even veteran ascetics could do nothing about it; all, both old and new, were of the same class and had equal privileges and rights of first preference!

Of course, there was quite a difference between the old and the new ascetics in the matter of behaviour and attitude. In the past, a calm and quiet mood had prevailed among those sitting in line until the chhatra doors opened. But that silence was disturbed after the arrival of these new faces. At first it began with a very little murmur; but in the long run this became louder and louder and led on to arguments and quarrels.

And now the quarrels were not between ascetic and non-ascetic, but between ascetic and ascetic. But you should not think that because it is a quarrel between ascetics that it must be about some intricate problem of philosophy or some disagreement concerning theism and atheism. To my dismay I discovered that it was nothing of that sort. These renunciants got involved in the most ordinary and commonplace type of disputes; just as we ordinary people make mountains out of molehills and quarrel and combat and at last turn up in the court to file a law-suit–they too do just the same. For instance:

One sadhu squeezed into the line, partly sitting on a Vaishnava beside him. And that was enough. Let us listen to them for a moment. The Vaishnava yells:

"Ooof! Is this sadhu's stomach so empty that he can't see with his own eyes where he is sitting? There is so much space, and yet he has to sit on top of me?"

He to whom this is addressed, understands that it is a direct attack on his asceticism or monkship. But asceticism or monkship is a very frail thing....can it tolerate an attack of this sort? Therefore he retorts immediately:

"And is the pinch of your hunger less than anyone else's? It seem that you are so hungry that you have reserved your own place all through the night, just to satisfy your growing stomach. Couldn't you at least leave space for people to pass? What kind of Vaishnava are you?"

There is no escape for the sadhu now. This was like pouring oil on fire! The first man flared right up, shouting:

"What? Are you daring to bring in my caste and religion? So much audacity? Do you know Radharani's Brindavan is the place only for Vaishnavas? No one here can hide his sins. Look everyone: just by purchasing orange dye and changing the colour of his robes he has become a sadhu overnight! He thinks that no one is aware of his trick!"

Now tell me, who would not be boiling mad, being insulted like this? With insults like these, a dead man would jump out of his grave! He was only human, so what else could one expect from him? When a public statement had been uttered so blatantly about his newly-dyed robes, he proceeded to respond furiously in kind; no offensive word failed to pour from his tongue. His diatribe began, and a stream of abuse poured forth:

"And you, good fellow! Do you think I don't know about the real Vaishnavas of Brindavan? I keep track of what goes on: you yourself only arrived a few days back. Who did you run away from your village with? Shall I speak her name to everybody?....."

Hearing all this commotion, the other sannyasis covered their ears, saying, "Ram! Ram! What are you two doing here? How can you talk like that here in a public place?"

After this incident, no one was oblivious to the reason for the sudden increase in the population of renunciants there. But how can one blame the refugees? After all, what else could homeless people do? They did not come here to be sadhus, but their needs had led them to it. Since they found that for a few coins they could dye their robes and then find enough food, well, who wouldn't do it, with an empty stomach? And by blending in with the local population, they found that they were accepted by others.

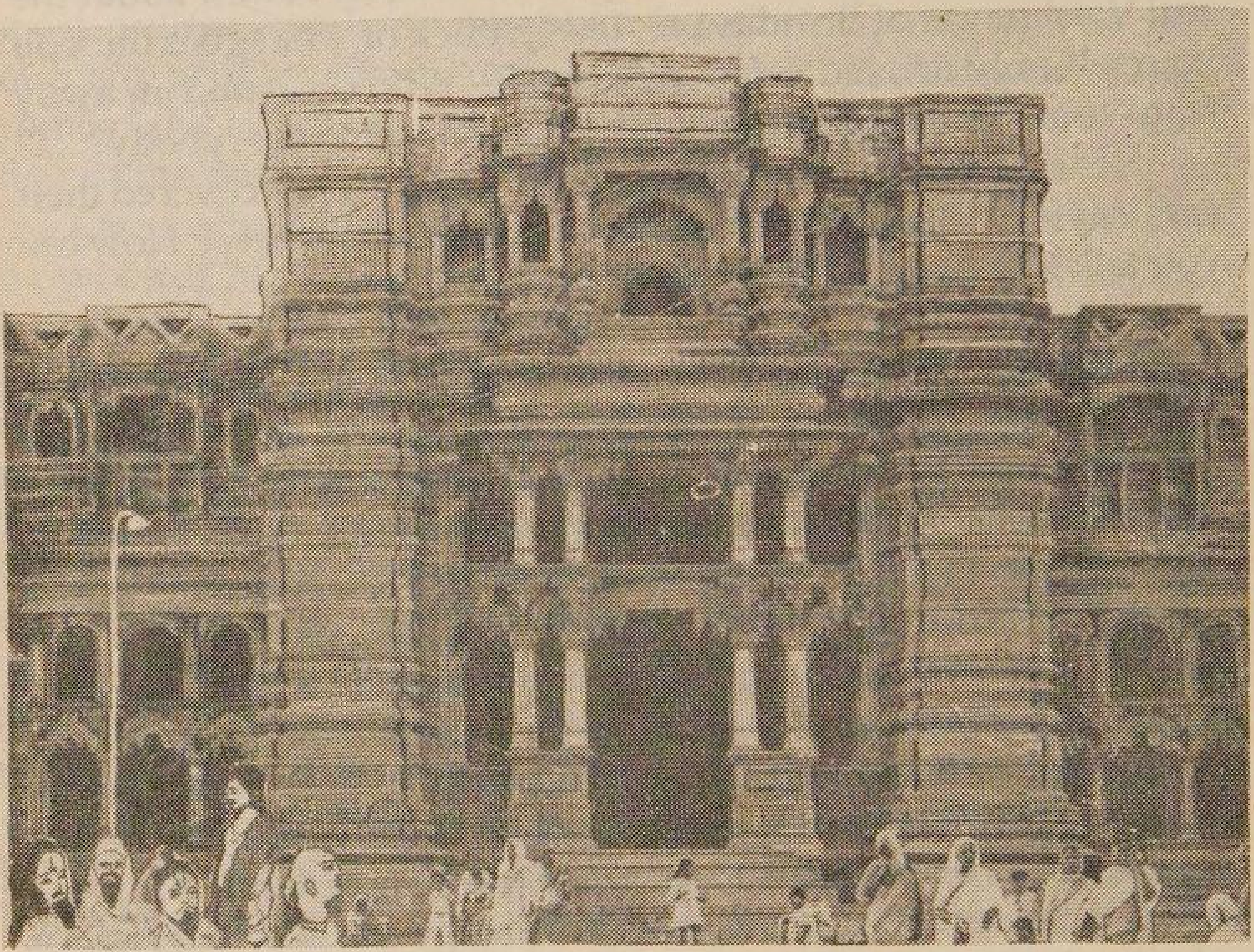
Indeed, unless one is able to be like that, it will be difficult not merely to find food but to remain in Brindavan at all. For in that area pilferers and rascals are anyway quite common. After the arival of the refugees, quite some advantage accured to them; for whether it was rupees and paise, utensils and property, sons and daughters,.....whatever was purloined, everybody laid the blame on the refugees. They said,

"These fellows have spoiled our land. There was not so much theft and villainy before they came!"

So the townspeople were suspicious of them, and chased them away from their rooms and residences. And the police kept a strict watch on their movements and arrested them for any theft or misdeed.

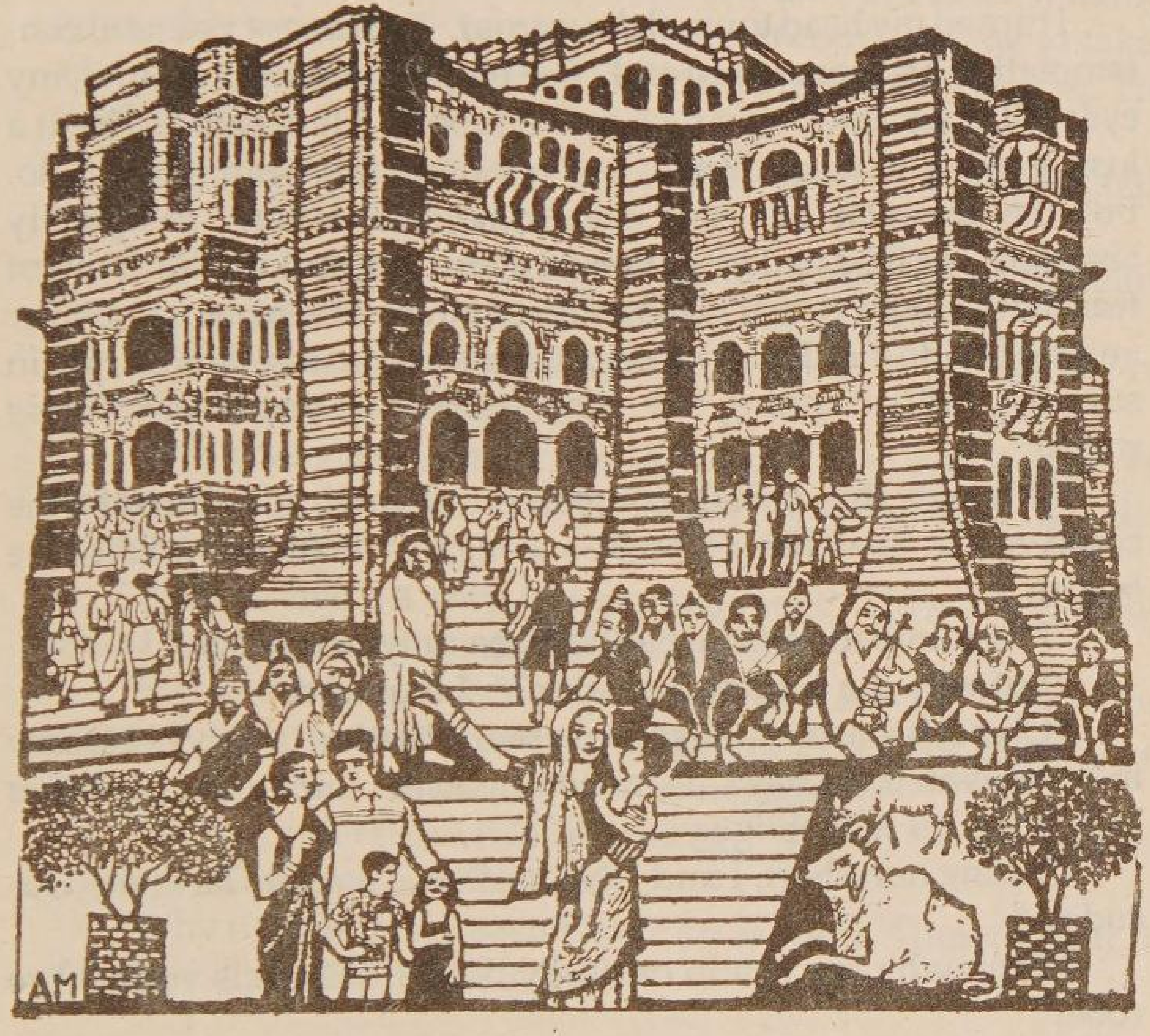
Observing all this, two or three of my *madhukari* companions were converted into ascetics and Vaishnavas overnight!

Speaking of those companions, I am reminded of one late afternoon at the Govindaji's temple when there was no gathering for the Bhagavat reading, and I happened to be sitting on the top step of the western gate enjoying the sunset. From my high vantage point I could look down....down the many steps which led to the street far below. And from there, straight on as far as the horizon the whole western side of Brindavan was open to my gaze. To one side there was Lala Babu's temple surrounded by a high wall; to the other were the Shaji's temple, the Ashtasakhi's temple and the Gopinathji's temple. Beyond these were the spires of numerous others that extended as far as the eye could see. And then beyond the city, where the land met the sky, a glorious sun was setting. With the intensity of that setting sun, the trees and greenery of Brindavan, its houses, temples and the sky above it all took on the most exquisite hues.



But no one seemed to take the time to appreciate all this beauty. The sadhus and Vaishnavas who were sitting there on the steps with me had not come there for that purpose. At that time of day, you see, they sat there on the steps to receive madhukari from devotees who leaving the temple after having offered puja to the deity within.

I never participated in all of this; I would collect madhukari in no other place but the chhatra, for I felt some repulsion and could not force myself to it. Therefore I had ample time at my disposal, and seemed to be the only observer of that marvellous sunset. I



was not on the look-out for prospective givers, so I was not taking much notice of the sannyasis; if I had, I might have noticed much sooner that one of them was a former companion of mine.

Of course, it is doubtful whether I would have recognised him at first sight; for only the day before I had seen him in village dress: a tight short dhoti and a white handloom shawl about his shoulders; and today he was a totally different personality, covered now with saffron robes and wearing a red turban on his head, sitting there among the sadhus. How could I have recognized this transformation?

But just then an incident occurred. A rich Marwari, after parking his car below, came up to the temple with his entourage. As soon as the still calm ocean of sannyasis became aware of the approaching party, that stillness turned into a turbulent wave-tossing sea! A struggle ensued to determine who would stand first in line for requesting madhukari from this rich donor.

I turned my head toward the uproar. The time of peaceful contemplation had come to an end. The moment I turned around, my eyes fell upon a sadhu in new saffron robes. He seemed to be at a loss, looking here and there, and not quite knowing what to do. But the moment his eyes met mine, his actions completely changed....as if he had forgotten all about madhukari. As if out of fear that I would reveal his identity to all the others, he came over and sat beside me. Finally recognizing who he was, I asked him in surprise, "What's going on? How long have you been in these robes?"

Although this former companion of mine was Punjabi, he could speak snatches of broken Bengali. Without preface he began,

"I took initiation from Sadhu Baba only yesterday."

"But why the sudden initiation?" I inquired.

"Oh no, it wasn't sudden. You see, initiation is very necessary in Brindavan these days. Why don't you get initiated too? If you like, my guru will oblige you...."

Cutting him short, I said, "No brother, I already have my Gurudev."

"Then why are you in ordinary dress? Where is your ochre robe?"

"In our spiritual practice there is no formal initiation as such; and there is no special dress."

"Then why not take initiation of renunciation here? In sadhana one needs many gurus. Haven't you read the Puranic and Tantric texts?"

"No," I replied, "What do they say?"

"They say that as a bee goes from one flower to another collecting honey, so also a disciple aspiring for knowledge should go from one guru to the next." He said. "One guru will give him a loin-cloth, one will give him a mantra and knowledge, and some ~~other~~ again will give him of the Tantra ...."

This fellow was probably two or three years my junior, and very lean and thin, looking more like a boy of thirteen or fourteen.

Hearing these words of wisdom from one so young, I asked him in great surprise, "How did you learn so much at such a young age?"

"Why, I learned it from my Guruji. I too have taken initiation in another monastery; but a guru here encouraged me to take it again......to make it easy for me to procure food in Brindavan. That is why I did it."

"Oh, I see," I said. "How much did it cost? I've heard that the whole process is rather expensive."

"But I didn't pay anything. My Guruji managed everything. He took me to the door of a merchant, and asked him,

"O merchant sir, this boy wants to become an ascetic, but he does not have a single paise..."

"This was sufficient. It was arranged then and there. The merchant said, 'Your honour, you must not worry about it; I shall bear the expenses'."

"Indeed, that's a very fine arrangement! How are you supposed to perform your religious practice?"

"So far the Guru has not given me any specific instructions except for my vow of chastity and personal service to him," he said. "The formal instruction will come later."

"That's understandable, of course. Where is your Guru's ashram? Can I see him?" I asked.

"Why not? But he doesn't have an ashram. Tomorrow at the chhatra I'll point him out to you."

The next day I met my friend again at the chhatra. As soon as he saw me he remembered my request, and asked,

"Would you like to see my Guruji?"

As he spoke his eyes circled the area, searching for his master among the crowd, and he at once pointed him out:

"There, look over there - my Guruji is standing at the gate of the chhatra......."

Following his gaze I looked in that direction and asked,

"Do you mean that sadhu with orange-red powder on his forehead, a red turban on his head, with long beard and hair? Is he your guruji?"

"Yes, yes! You've spotted him correctly. That is my Guruji."

"Then," I joked, "your Guruji is the door-keeper of the chhatra?"

His face suddenly beamed with joyful pride.

"Yes, certainly he is!" he replied. "Wherever he goes he becomes the gatekeeper. Do you know that all the beggars are very much afraid of him?"

"Yes, I know very well that they have good reason to be afraid of him. Anyone except a sadhu who approaches the chhatra door gets a generous elbow, with enough force to end up flat on the ground!" I replied.

He was much amused at my comment and said,

"Yes, yes! Anyone who eats the food meant for renunciants deserves every bit of it!"

"Yes, brother - and just wait till you stand at the door. Your Guru is old and weak, but you will be able to give them a real solid thrashing!"

At this, he broke into peals of laughter.

Yes, let him laugh. But I could not enjoy my own joke. It would have been better for me if I had never set eyes on his Guru. For now I could only see that my friend had become more interested in food than in spiritual growth.

"Yes," I thought to myself, "You are really intelligent; you have chosen a gatekeeper for your guru, one who gives the permission to enter the chhatras - so you are assured of being well fed."

But perhaps I was being too harsh on him. Perhaps it was only the pressure of circumstances that had obliged him to take this new direction.

But enough about food. Dwelling so much on food lowers the consciousness........I did not permit my mind to continue on that line, but turned it towards the Lord.

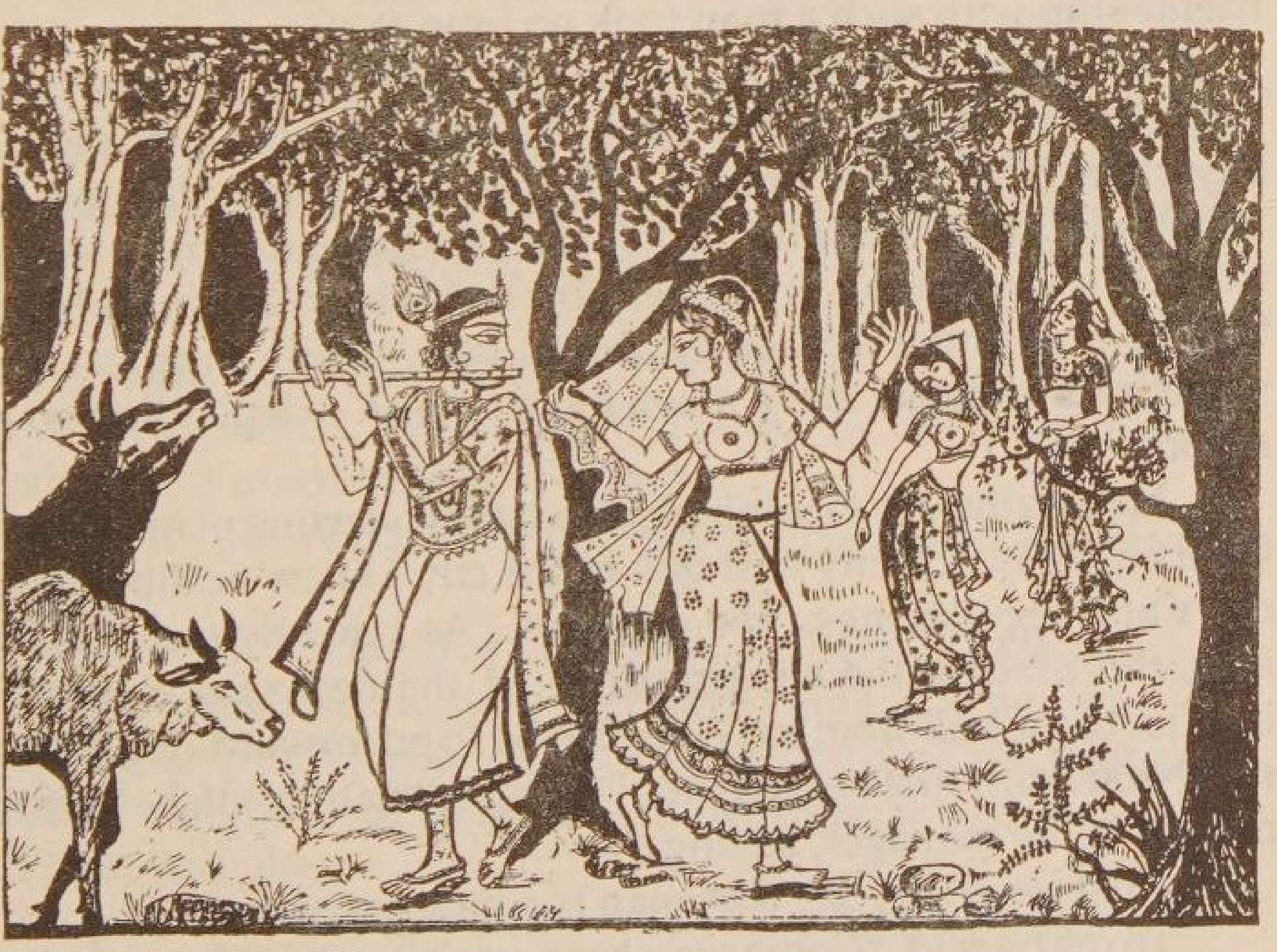
Before I came to Brindavan I had long wondered privately whether there was still a place called Brindavan, or was it only stories and imagination? Now, having finally arrived there, why was I bothering so much with these mundane matters and petty desires? Let me rather concentrate on what I went there for - for

'Nitya Brindavan' - the eternal Brindavan, the eternal Moksha-dham where all desire extinguishes itself.

Our poet has said that in the eternal Brindavan, Radha and Krishna are eternal, and so too their *lila* - their play. But the road to that eternal Brindavan is a long one, difficult to taverse and full of obstacles. One can reach that place only guided by the pure searchlight of the soul. No matter how long the journey, no matter what the perils encountered on the way, still that Brindavan exists. At the end, arriving at the final destination, Nitya Brindavan, eternal Brindavan, will surely be attained one day!

It was this hope that kept me going. I thought of that Nitya Brindavan, that state of inner delight which the Gopis felt after experiencing the inexpressible vision, the unspeakable beauty of form that is Krishna:

"My eyes were immersed in that ocean of beauty,
My mind was lost in the heaven of His Youth!"



Chapter Seven

A second friend of mine in Brindavan also became a Vaishnava.

I was much closer to this friend than to the Punjabi who became a sadhu ... he was from Bengal like myself, so we had much more in common by background; this was one of the reasons for the formation of our intimacy.

But the friend-ship was based on much more than just background. I had met quite a number of Bengalees there , yet had become close to very few. Nitai Bauri was a person who made friends easily. He was without pretence; to feel at ease; to fall into friend-ship with such a man took no time at all.

Yes, he told me that his name was Nitai Bauri. There was no way of ascertaining his age from his face ... he could have been anywhere between 30 and 50. His face was deeply tanned and weathered by the sun, and his fair complexion had turned copperish. A few gray hairs were discernible on his head and in his beard. Still he sometimes addressed me as *dada* - elder brother - and sometimes he spoke to me much more formally, depending on his mood.

He was the one to initiate me into the collecting of madhukari from chhatras. On my first day in the city I knew nothing of the rules and regulations of the chhatras. As I quietly stood to one side, the head of the chhatra directed the new guests into the interior of the building; but I felt too shy to go forward. It was then that Nitai Bauri first helped me. Disregarding himself, he pointed me out to the manager, saying,

"Just see there, Sir, that man is a new guest!"

To me he said, "Come over here, young man! You have come to take a meal in the chhatra, will it do if you remain shyly at a distance?"

There was resentment on the faces of many around me who saw that there was one more stomach with which to share the allotted food; so these words of encouragement and the friendly tone of his words were like a ray of sun piercing through dark clouds to me. Giving up my intention of eating in the chhatra I was moving towards him; but just then the manager called to me,

"Yes, you, Sir! Please come inside."

At his bidding, I entered my first chhatra. And the one who had encouraged me to come forward was himself not allowed inside that day, so there was no chance for me to thank him for what he had done. But the very next day I met him again at another chhatra, and again he greeted me as if I were an old friend, saying,

"Come, come here, Dada! Have you just begun to eat at chhatras?"

"Yes, brother," I replied.

"I guessed it the moment I saw you," he said. "How long have you been in Brindavan?"

"I have been here just a few days," I replied.

"Are you from East Pakistan?" he inquired.

I understood that he was hoping that I was from his own country so that we might be able to develop that special intimacy which exists among people of the same background. And I wished that I could have answered 'yes'; but it would not have been the truth, so something stopped me from replying in the affirmative.

"No, I am from West Bengal," I replied.

At these words, Nitai Bauri seemed to be extinguished abruptly, like a candle-flame. He said,

"Then if you are not a refugee, out of what suffering did you come here?"

"Is it only suffering that brings people here?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know why you have come, brother, but we came here after much suffering. You can come here and visit and then return home, but for us the banishment is final," he answered with a deep sadness.

I responded, "But why suffer? Can't you forget your country in spite of living in such a land of love? Don't you know how much merit one must accumulate before being allowed to come here? And moreover, you have been allowes to stay on ...."

"What do you mean?" Nitai Bauri interrupted me. "Shall I forget the paradise that I come from? If you can say such a thing, it means you have never been there. Only then could you understand the treasure we have left behind!"

His eyes shone as he spoke, and I understood that the divine image of his motherland had sprung up in his heart.

"Oh, what a country it is indeed!" he sighed. "Dense groves of coconut trees, mango trees, betel-nut and jackfruit trees ... even blackberry bushes in abundance! Every day of every month one fruit or the other is ripe for picking. When one is thirsty one longs for water, but we simply drink sweet coconut water .. as much as we want. Rivers abound in the land ... the Padma, Meghana, Dhaleswari and the Lakshya ... flowing on through the villages and fields, the ditches and long tanks with connecting canals or ponds to every doorstep, where fishermen catch fish with the help of fencing nets. On the Padma as far as the eye can see, fishing boats with sails billowing seem to flying all the way to the horizon. Just tell me, where else can one see beauty such as that? Truly, that land is our eternal friend! She has fed our fathers and forefathers for generation after generation, and has nourished us as a mother feeds her children. And you, you are telling me to forget her?"

I was speechless; no words came to comfort him. I said only, "But what can be done? Perhaps this is a punishment from God. Man is helpless to intervene. Perhaps there is a lesson in this for your nation."

"Enough, enough! Hold your tongue, please!" he replied. "Why should God punish us? This is the result of human errors. Our leaders made great blunders. And by advising us to leave the country, our village elders committed a greater error still. After all, we were ruled by Muslim emperors for more than a century - were we mudered or forcibly converted? What can they do to us, actually? Will they slay us or convert us to Islam? This is all nonsense ... nothing but idle speculation!"

"Nonsense and speculation?" I asked him. "All of you ran away solely on a speculation? I have heard otherwise - that

Hindus were tortured without any cause, and that it was from this fear that you people and your children ran away."

"So, you think we left out of fear? Then what about our condition now? Do you think we feel secure here? After all, we'll die here just as we would have died there. So isn't it better to die in one's home, rather than in another country?"

"Suppose India and Pakistan again become united ... would you then return to your home?" I asked, to pacify him a little.

Nitai Bauri burst into tears and said,

"Alas, my brother! Shall I return to my house? But where is my house? I have sold them all at a very cheap price. And to whom shall I go now? Who lives there? As we were on our way here, some ruffians absconded with my young wife, and my elderly mother died from the shock of it in Tarapasa station, before we arrived here. So after all of this, what is there to go back to?"

He was oblivious of his surroundings as he spoke. The Vaishnavas and sadhus had gathered around us and were listening with rapt attention, but he was unaware of their presence. We had arrived well in advance of the opening time of the chhatra, and we still had time to spare; but I did not encourage him to reminisce further, because who knows where this conversation might have led him? Instead, I abruptly changed to subject, asking,

"You have been here quite a long time, haven't you? Where are you staying?"

"In a cave with some sadhus," he replied abstractedly.

"I see no hills near here," I asked, "where is the cave?"

"It's not in a hill," he replied. It is a cave in a dharmashala."

Then he in his turn asked me, "You? Where do you put up?"

"I'm staying in the *Nat-mandir*[1] of the Govindaji temple." I told him.

"You mean you live with the other sadhus there?"

"No, I stay up above it, in the open."

"Oh, my goodness! How do you sleep at night on that cold stone, brother?"

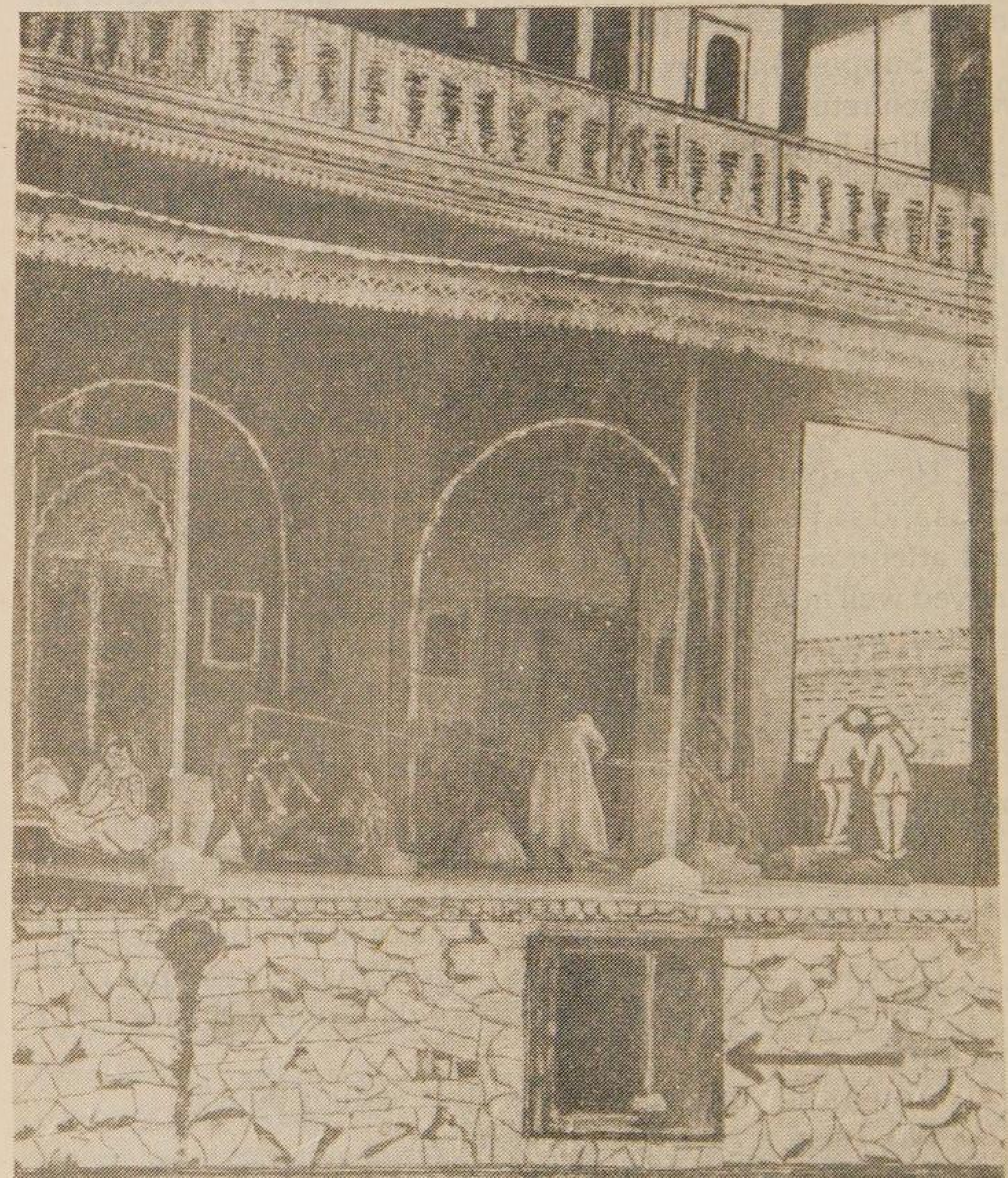
"Well, at least I have a place to sleep," I replied.

At this he inquired, "Would you like to come and stay with us in the cave? There is only one difficulty - it's hard to enter."

"If you can get into it, why shouldn't I be able to?" I asked.

"Come with me ... you can see for yourself."

So that very day we went together to the cave. I saw that it really was a cave. There was a subterranean space underneath the Mirzapur Dharmashala, which the sadhus had converted into a dwelling-place. There was only one entrance. It was a small hole about eighteen inches square. That automatically excluded all fat sadhus: it was a residence for skinny sadhus only. The entrance was only just barely above the ground,and the level of the cave



floor was slightly below ground-level. Because of this it was not so very hard to enter.

I had been adept at climbing into our narrow rice-storage closet at home; but even so, this cave took me several days to adjust to. First I put one leg in, then I bent over and squeezed my head and chest through; then I shifted my weight to the leg that was already inside, and pulled my torso through, the other leg coming in last of all. Once inside, we dreaded going back out unless it was unavoidable. In fact after entering I often wondered how I would ever leave that 'mother's womb'!

But there were advantages to it as well. Even though it was open, dogs, cats and birds did not enter it and dirty it. Also we were well-protected in winter: cold wind could not enter, and with the warmth of our nearness to each other, we were very cozy there in cold weather.

Although the entrance was so small. this underground cavern was high enough for us to be able to stand upright, and even permitted two sadhus from Madras to do their one-hour headstand or *shirsasana*. And it was large enough to allow fifteen or twenty of us ample room to sleep in. Even in broad daylight the interrior of the cave was pitch dark; if there had been a snake or toad inside, we would not have seen it.

The sadhus from Madras placed themselves near the entrance; they would light a candle with which to worship their deity. By that light we would move around and settle ourselves down for the night. Each of us would keep our blankets in a particular spot where we would sleep regularly. After being given a bit of unrefined sugar as *prasad*, we all went to bed.

At about 3 a.m. our morning activity would begin: some meditating, some chanting hymns, some practising *hatha yoga* and *pranayama* (breathing exercises), while others started going out to bathe; such was our routine.

It was all due to Nitai Bauri that I found such a suitable place to stay. Though no one was in charge of it, nevertheless no outsider would dare to enter it, such was the power of the cave-dwellers - or perhaps the forbidding aspect of the cave itself!

As in any place where people live together, there were some rules to be observed; none but permanent residents had the right to stay there. It was through Nitai Bauri that I gained that right. When I first arrived, Nitai Bauri gave me a gunny-bag from his bed to spread out and lie on. Another day he offered me a Gita - a book as small as a match-box, published by the Gorakhpur Gita Press in Sanskrit-types. Handing it to me he said,

"Brother, since I can't read or write, you can read it aloud to me every day."

From that day on, my intimacy with Nitai Bauri became close and deep. Every night on our return, before we entered the cave, I would read passages aloud to him beneath the lights of the Dharmashala, and he listened very attentively. When there were passages he could not follow, he would ask, "What did you say? Say it again." And I would repeat the verses.

After these sessions we would enter the cave together and go to sleep side by side. The next morning I would get up first; when I had finished with my routine, I would wait for him to finish with his.

It was his habit to wake a little late. He would get up and take his bath in tap water outside. As he bathed he would chant in a full voice, "*Om namo Shivaya, Om namo Shivaya*", like other ascetics, to help ward off the chill of that cold water bath. Then he would sit on his bed and take out a miniature mirror from his wallet and with its help he would cover his forehead with ashes (*vibhuti)* and comb his hair and tie up a tuft of it on his crown. I would wait until he had finished, and then we would go out together in search of madhukari in the chhatras. Even in the chhatra-queue we would stand side by side. If sadhus stopped me at the entrance, he would plead on my behalf.

It went on like this, day after day. He had no other friend as close as me, and I had none like him. After eating each of us would go our separate ways, but we always met again at the entrance to the cave at night. Whoever came first would wait for the other. This was our fixed routine every day.

Who could guess that a friendship like this would end in such a way?

One day Nitai Bauri didn't come back to the cave. The following night too he was missing, and the next night and the next. For many days I simply didn't see him. Everybody had to go to the chhatra to eat, wherever he might stay, but I did not meet him at the chhatra either. I guessed that he must have left town. Perhaps he hadn't had the time to say goodbye.

I remembered that he had once remarked,

"My name is Nitai Bauri, but actually I'm Nitai Baul ... I'm simply a wandering ascetic minstrel. I cannot bear to stay in one place for any length of time. Sometimes I leave this place. I go to Hardwar, Rishikesh, Lachhmanjhola, or to Gaya, Kashi and Prayag, or to Rameshwaram, Kanyakumari and Dwarka. I roam wherever I wish. Sometimes for a change of menu and mode of life too, I even set out to perform madhukari in the villages around Brindavan."

I asked him, "Do even the villagers around here offer you madhukari?"

"Why not?" he replied. "Such an offering is not given even by the townspeople of Brindavan and Mathura. Those villagers offer a great deal... they're very generous. I get twice and thrice what I get herethroughout the year. Only you have to know the tactics of madhukari, that's all. It will not be sufficient if you go and stand there just anyhow."

"Tactics? You mean that you have to use psychology even for madhukari?"

"Of course! Where do we not use tactics in our lives? The whole world runs on this basis. Just look around you-if you go to Gokul[2] and utter the name of Krishna, you can forget about madhukari ... you won't even be allowed to stand there, let alone be given madhukari. Likewise, if you go to Nandagram[3] and say 'Radhe Radhe',[4] just watch out! They may even chase you away - right out of town! So you can see that the right behaviour in the appropriate setting is very necessary."

Surprised, I responded, "Really, this is hard to believe! After all, are Radha and Krishna two separate beings? How can Radha's name receive no respect in Nandagram, and why the people of Gokul find it intolerable if one utters Krishna's name? How extraordinary!"

"Then you can easily understand what danger we have to face .... Why don't you come with me once and see it with your own eyes? I've experienced all this first-hand. That's why I'm so sure of it. It's like a close brother and sister who compete with each other. This quarrel between Radha's followers and Krishna's followers is never-ending—it continues generation after generation.

"Have you ever heard any of those 'Quarrelling Songs'?" he went on asking.

"Yes, certainly," I replied, "many times. Isn't this one of them?

The male parrot says-"My Krishna lifted a mountain."
The female parrot replies-"His strength to do it came from my
Radha. Otherwise, how could he
have done it?"

But Nitai Bauri disagreed:

"No, no! Those birds didn't say that at all."

"What do you mean? Didn't they speak? It's right there in the song!" I replied.

"Let the song be, but I say it again: those birds didn't say it. They are just birds and birds don't sing with words. Those words are the words of the villagers of Gokul and Nandagram. That's the way the people of Nandagram and Gokul quarrel with each other. The language and the ideas belong to them. When Nandagram boasts that their Krishna is the Lord of the Universe, and Gokul replies that Radha is the fulfiller of all the wishes of her devotees, then who is really the Lord of the world?

"Do you realise what it means to be the fulfiller of all wishes?" he asked me.

I was prepared to answer this question in detail, but he didn't allow me to speak. He said,

"No, I will tell you. The meaning is that Gokul wants to say, 'You are saying that your Krishna is lord of the universe ... a beautiful thought! Very, very nice. But if your lord lacks the capacity to fulfill his devotees' wishes, then what does 'Lord of the Universe' actually mean? Who will obey him, love him? It is only our Radha who can actually fulfill the devotees' wishes. So with this in mind, you can judge for yourself who is superior!"

"It's really very strange!" I said. "Is it possible to separate the elements of this Divine Union and then quarrel about them?"

"Not only quarrel, brother," Nitai Bauri told me. "Sometimes there are even fights - staff to staff fights! This kind of dispute is not just a matter of today, it is centuries old. And it's not only limited to Gokul and Nandagram. You will find similar quarrels in Mathura, Ayodhya, Kashi, and Hardwar ... wherever you go in India this custom is in vogue. Followers of Krishna will not take the name of Ram, and Ram's devotees will never think of calling for Krishna; Lord Shiva's devotees never take the name of Vishnu, and Vaishnavites never call to Shiva. They know only their particular god - no other deity has any place in their hearts!"

Listening to Nitai Bauri's observations I thought, "Who could guess that this man cannot read or write?" Seeing me quietly reflecting, Nitai Bauri asked,

"What is making you so thoughtful? After all I have said about Gokul and Nandgram, have you lost your regard for those places? Listen, don't take it so seriously. Life is like that. If you see the thing properly, your respect for them should even increase."

"Did your respect for them increase like this?" I asked him.

"You may not believe me, brother, but yes; seeing the sincerity of their single-minded devotion, my respect for them did increase. Why shouldn't it? This is not just quarrelling. This is more than a quarrel - it shows their devotion and their pride and love that they are people of Radha-Krishna's lands. You will not see this same type of feeling in Mathura and Brindavan. The people of those places are above the ordinary man because of this dedication; there is a nobility about them. When they offer food to madhukars, it is as if they were offering it to the Divine himself or herself. If I ask for mandukari in those villages, I am given there in ten days what I would received here in Brindavan over a whole year. That is where I was given this blanket, my clothes and my kamandalu. But for the generosity of those villagers I would have only this one thin cloth that I originally brought with me. So, now do you understand?"

"All right, all right," I replied. "I see your point. But you also mentioned trips to Hardwar, Rishikesh and so on. Don't you need tickets for your travels?

When he was in an agitated state Nitai Bauri would drop his mother-tongue and revert to Hindi; and when he began his non-stop Hindi tirade, no one could get a word in edgewise. With this last question of mine about tickets he took off like a rocket; it was as if I were the ticket-checker and he the would-be passenger.... I had asked about his ticket for travelling!

His fury broke forth in a spray of Hindi:

"Why should I pay fare, sir? Do sadhus and Vaishnavas pay fare? Never!"

I laughed at his dramatic response and replied: "Yes, sir, I know that, but you are not one of them, are you?"

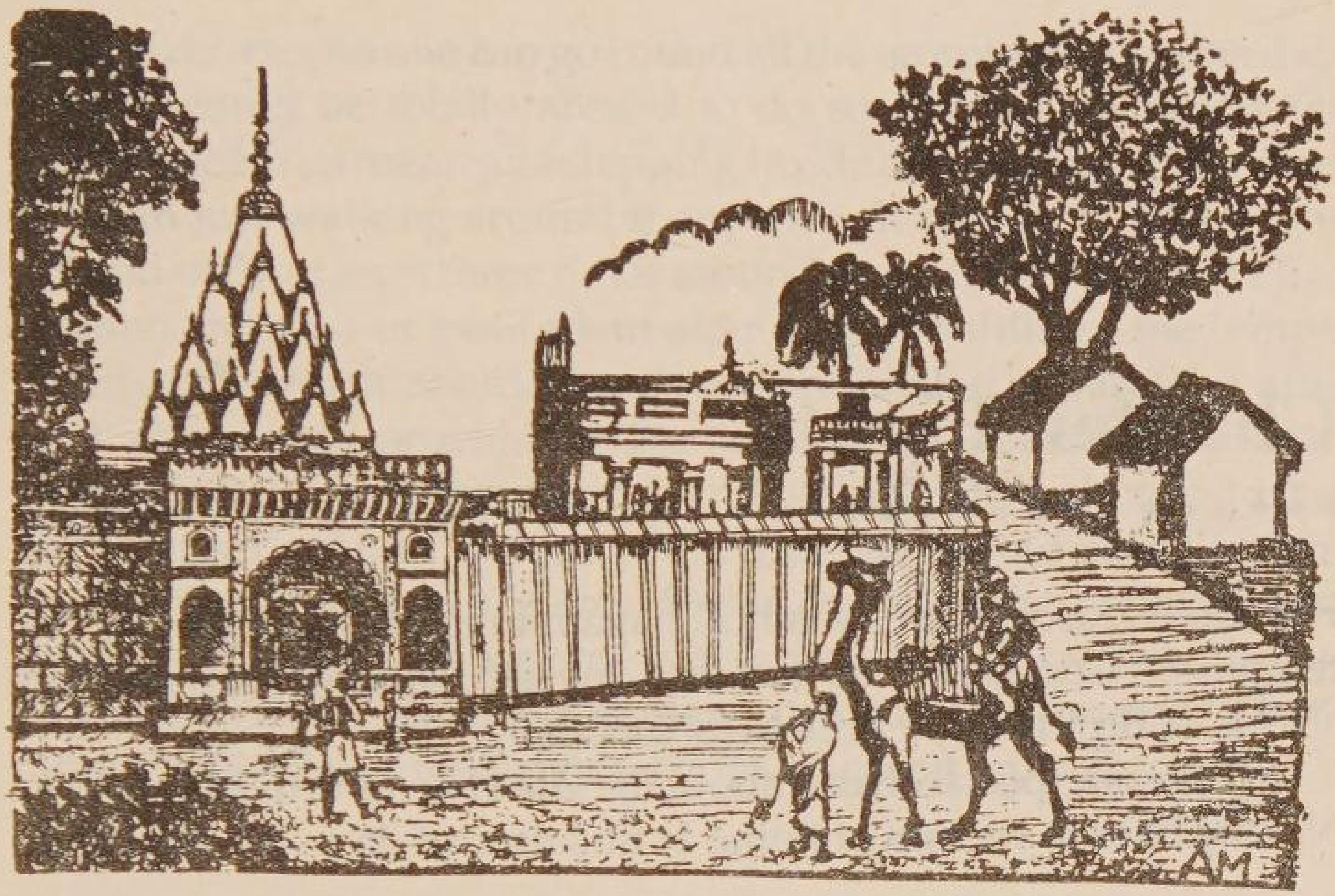
It so happened that in innocent fun I had struck Nitai Bauri in a very sensitive spot. His temper rose:

"What do you mean? I'm not an ascetic or Vaishnava? I'm as good as they are! I'm an ascetic, if you call me an ascetic; I'm a Vaishnava, if you call me one. Show me how I'm inferior to them?"

Indeed, he had a point! He had long hair and a beard, carried a brass kamandalu in one hand and in the other a bedroll; on his shoulder hung a bag ... all the signs of a sadhu were there; and just as the Vaishnavas do, he always wore a long white robe woven of heavy twill. So in what way was he inferior to sadhus and Vaishnavas? In addition to all this he had so mastered Hindi that he received the respect of a man of knowledge ... a V.I.P. Thus he had been able to travel without paying fare, anywhere he liked throughout India.

So now, remembering this past incident, I thought that perhaps Nitai Bauri had left town in quest of new madhukari, so that was why he was nowhere to be seen in Brindavan.

But no! A few days later I came across him all of a sudden, still in town, but how different! His clothes had changed, and so had everything about him!



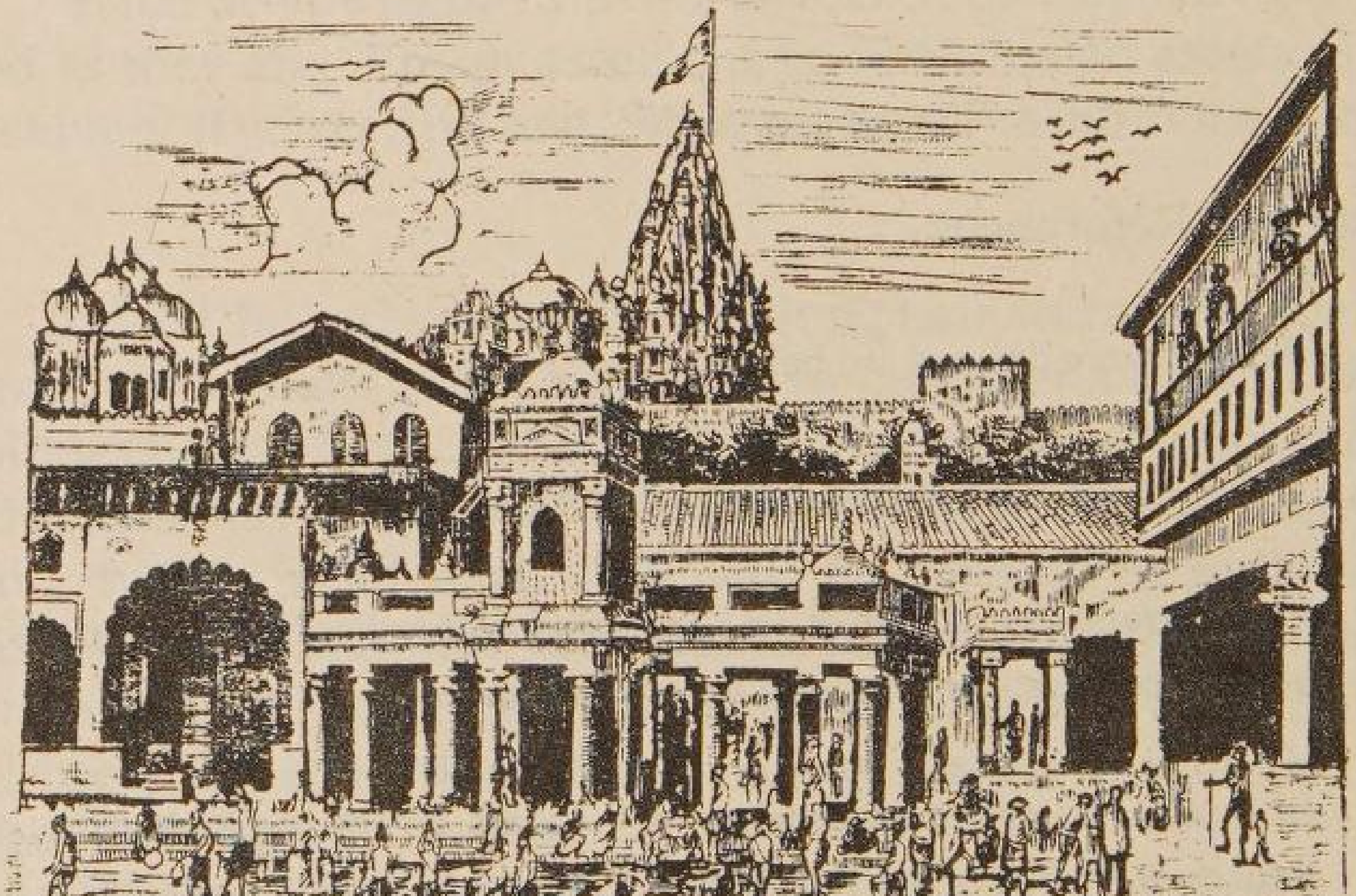
Note and References

1. A hall where dramas are held.
2. Gokul - a small town near Mathura, the pilgrimage place of Radha
3. Nandagram - the village of Sri Krishna's foster father Nanda, where Krishna and his brother were brought up as cow-herds.
4. In Brindavan, when madhukars or beggars go for Madhukari, to private houses, they call out 'Radhe, Radhe!", as if the housewife were Radha herself.

Chapter Eight

For some reason there was no Bhagavat reading that day at the temple of Gopinathji, so I found myself walking through the streets of Brindavan a little before evening.

There is a special charm about the late afternoon in Brindavan. No one likes to remain at home at this time of day - it is a time to be out and about; men and women, young and old, all come out into streets. There are between five and six thousand temples in Brindavan, of varying sizes, and this is the time of day for the people to make their rounds of the temples.

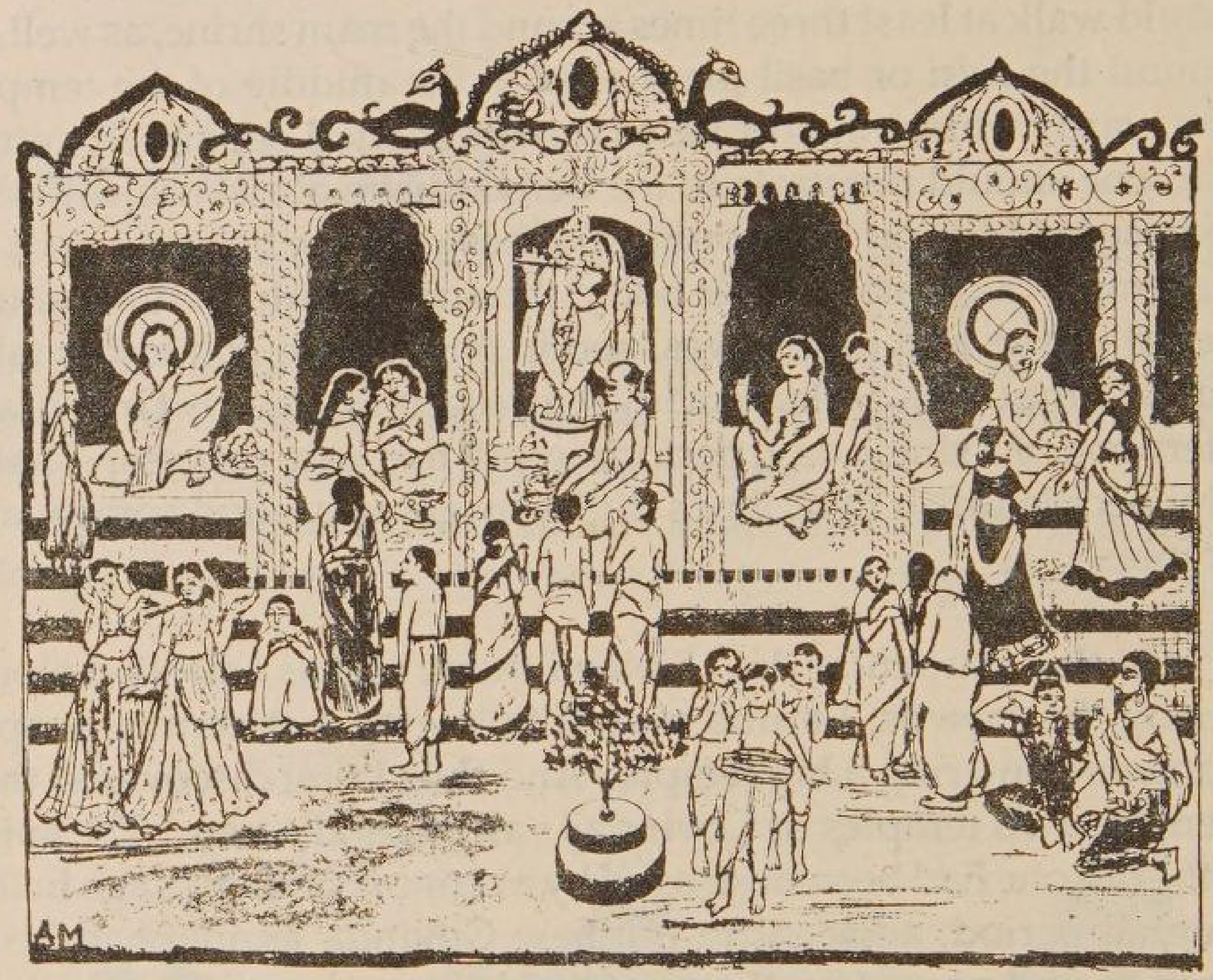


Of course, no one can go round all the temples in just one day, and it would be totally absurd to do so. For going round the temple does not mean just stepping inside and out again, nor does it mean just walking around it anyhow. It means that, first, one should walk at least three times around the main shrine, as well as around the *tulsi* or basil plant alter in the middle of the temple courtyard, which should be circumambulated separately; after that, one should prostrate to the deity - make obeisance with the body spread flat on the ground, and besmear the holy *roja* dust of the temple over one's whole body; then one should partake of the sacred water[1] and *tulsi* leaves, and in one temple or another take *prasad* of the deity. So how many temples could one visit in the late afternoon of a single day, performing all this long process? That's why people finish their day's duties by going around some main temples.

On that particular day, I joined them; and as I strolled along among the crowds, I found myself following a stream of people who were entering a big temple. And thus I first discovered that there are two temples of Govindaji - an old and a new. The spire of the old one had been destroyed by a cannon, centuries ago in the Mughal period; adjacent to it a new Govinda temple had been erected - and nowadays the new temple is much more ornate than the original one.

As I entered its huge compound which was surrounded by high walls, I felt as if I had been transported into a monastery of Vaishnava monks similar to the 'Monastery of Muraripukur' described in Saratchandra's novel *Srikanto*. Just such a forest full of lotuses,[2] and just such Vaishnava women of all ages and types were busy with their myriad activities here too! Some of them were separating jasmine buds from their stems, while others were weaving garlands for the deity, beside them. On another side, some women were carefully hand-pleating the garments that were soon to adorn the deities. Then there were women preparing the oil lamps to be used in the *arati* ceremony, while others were distributing tulsi-leaf prasad to devotees and visitors. Inside the *garbha griha*, or inner sanctum, four or five female Vaishnavas were helping the priest to decorate the twin idols - Radha and Krishna.

Only one aspect of the Muraripukur monastery was missing from the scene I saw: the preparation of food to be offered to the Lord ... such as boiling milk and making *khir*, or condensed milk, the preparation of sweet coconut balls and the kneading of dough for making *luchi* (a cake fried in ghee); perhaps these things were made elsewhere in the inner apartments of the temple. Apart from this, the rest of the scene was exactly like Saratchandra's description of Muraripukur monastery. Here too, everyone was busy with their assigned tasks. All were so occupied that there was no time for them to notice those who were coming and going - for the deadline of the evening light-waving ceremony was fast approaching; all their efforts were directed towards the punctual completion of their various tasks.



That day was a special day in the temple - *purnima*, or full-moon night. As the preparations proceeded, a bright moonlight began to cast its glow through the clear blue sky to the horizon. Throughout the temple courtyard visitors sat down, pausing in their rounds to absorb the heavenly beauty of that sky above, and down below, the scene within the temple. And - thrilling sensation the strains of *kirtan* were drifting into range, with the rhythmic beat of both *khol* (drum) and small bell-like cymbals in accompaniment:

Nitai enechhe nam—
Hare Krishna, Hare Ram ...

Nitai has brought the Name —
Hare Krishna, Hare Rama.

After the ceremony was completed, as I was leaving the temple to return to my shelter, I heard a familiar voice and stopped in my tracks. Wasn't that Nitai Bauri's voice? Taking a few steps more, I saw that it was indeed he! He was deeply engrossed in animated conversation and chanting with a Vaishnava friend.

I went up to him and exclaimed in surprise,

"What, Nitai-da? You are still here in Brindavan?"

Immediately he began to welcome me in song:

"Come, come! O dear friend!
Tell me your good news!"

I knew from brfore that he would occasionally indulge in a little opium or *bhang*, procured from some sadhus, after which he would burst forth into *bhajans* or chant *stotras*. Since I knew his ways, I did not feel embarassed by his warm greeting. I sat down beside him and remarked,

"Life is going on ... not much has happened since you left. But what about you? Where have you been? I thought perhaps you had left town!"

"No brother, not for a single day have I left Brindavan; I've been here all along." he answered.

"Your staying right here? But why didn't you come back to the cave? I haven't seen you at the chhatras either - how are you managing?"

Nital Bauri indicated the typical Vaishnavite markings on his face and upper arms, saying,

"Can't you see? I've taken bhek[3] from Mohanto.[4]"

"Bhek? What is that?" I asked.

Until now Nitai Bauri's friend had remained silent; but at my query he replied for him:

"You don't understand bhek? It is the term used for initiation in Vaishnavism."

"Oh, now I see. That's why you're here in this temple. Otherwise you never frequented this place before, did you?"

Avoiding my question, Nitai Bauri exclaimed,

"What are you talking about? This is the abode of our Govinda, our beloved Krishna - shall I not come here?"

"So, you took bhek right here," I commented,

"Oh, yes, certainly. And it's because of that that I've been out of sight these past days," he responded warmly, happy to have found a justification for his unexplained disappearance. "This whole time I've been neither to the cave nor to chhatras - all my time has been spent at my Mohanto's *kunja*.[5] He has put me into the state of *madhur- bhava* (the emotion of intense love), and my days are passing in great joy!"

That Nitai Bauri's days were passing happily, anyone could see from his outward appearance. In these few days, a great change had taken place in him - almost as if fresh flowers had blossomed on a dying plant. He had the star-struck look of a newly-wedded bride. And he had also taken great pains with his personal appearance: he had been in the habit of making a tuft of hair on the crown of his head even before - now he had decorated that tuft with a *mala* of tulsi wood; his arms and neck too were adorned with tulsi malas, and altogether he looked extremely handsome and attractive.

"Really!" I thought to myself, "Why has his captivating form and dress been out of my sight for so long?"

"So you won't be returning to the cave?" I asked him. "Will you stay at your Mohanto's *kunja* permanently?"

"No, my friend, not permanently. There's not much space in the *kunja* - how can I stay there? Otherwise I haven't the least wish to leave. At night when the female Vaishnavas sing *kirtans* so beautifully, my feet become rooted to the ground, and I feel as if I never want to leave!"

"Do you mean that female Vaishnavas also sing in your *kunja*?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied, pointing, "Look at those women over there - they all sing."

Nitai Bauri's new friend broke in, "Stop - stop pointing! It's not at all polite to point your finger at ladies!"

Nitai Bauri at once became subdued and changed his mode of speech. He said, "You know, these last few days have been very fortunate for me. I have found a dear friend. My new brother here, Balaram-da ... he is even from my own place! It was because he too comes to listen to the *kirtan* singing that we first met ...."

Now he could speak of nothing but his new-found friend, Balaram-da. He asked him,

"Well, Balaram-da! Didn't I tell you that if Anuradha sings even one *kirtan*, the whole evening will be a success?"

His friend Balaram agreed, "Definitely! Listening to her sing, one loses all sense even of need to eat! And after her kirtan, all the other singers fell flat!"

This answer captivated Nitai Bauri. He grew really excited and said to his friend,

> "Do you believe me now? Aah! How beautifully she sang:
> 'I have just come from seeing him, O friend![6]
> I have just come from seeing him—
> So much beauty in each part of his body,
> My eyes could not conceive'!"

Hearing this, I asked, "Isn't that a *padavali* kirtan?[7] Is that sung at your Mohanto's place?"

"Of course it is, every day", he answered emphatically.

"Every day? During my entire stay in Brindavan I have heard Jatragan (dramatic song), Bhajans, I have seen Krishna Lila and Ras Lila, but I have never heard the Padavali kirtan! Is your version the same as those we hear on the radio, for instance, sung by Radharani, Chhabi Rani or Kamala Jharia?"

"Good grief! Don't mention your radio singers! They are nothing compared with ours. If you had only once heard our singers you would..."

Interrupting him I asked, "Then will you take me to hear them? It's my intense desire to hear those kirtans!"

Nitai Bauri fell silent, as if at a loss for words. After a pause, he said,

"Well, you would like to hear kirtans? All right, one of these days I'll take you ... when the time is right. First I'll need to get Mohanto's permission, because you do not belong to our society. I will let you know the day before- hand."

"All right," I replied. Don't forget it. Oh, it's getting late - I must go now."

And I stood up to leave.

Nitai Bauri did not return to the cave that night either. He had said that he would return the following night. So I left the new Govinda Mandir without him. But Nitai Bauri's new friend Balaram-da stood up and accompanied me, saying,

"Are you heading towards the Mirzapur Dharmasala? Come on, I'm going that way too."

On the way, he told me,

"Let me tell you one thing frankly, brother: don't go with your friend Nitai to hear the kirtans."

"Why not? Please tell me," I asked.

"Once you go there, you will be lost, as if in a labyrinth. Didn't your friend say that he had been given *madhur bhava*? It's all nonsense! Nothing of the kind! Those Vaishnava people are going to the dogs day by day with that kind of sweet emotion. Did Chaitanyadev ever tell them to perform religious practice with a female partner? No,never! Remember Sanatan Goswami! He never even spoke to a woman in Brindavan - he even turned away the famous devotee Mirabai when she came to see him. But now, just look what is happening these days ...."

I said in wonder, "But why are you speaking of 'them'? Aren't you yourself one of them?"

"Oh no, sir!" he said. "I have not yet gone so mad! I'm part of a different group, my society is different!"

"But didn't Nitai Bauri say that he had met you at his Mohanto's place? That you went there to listen to the kirtans every day?"

"I only go there to hear the kirtans," he responded. "They sing very well, that's why I go, and it is my only reason for being there."

"I would like to hear them too," I said. "But only to listen, not to join their group."

"But you are not married, are you?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "I'm not married."

"That's why I'm warning you beforehand not to go there.

There is a sticky substance in that *Kunja* - you'll get stuck there," he said. "I'm a family man with a wife and children at home; for me there is no danger. I'm not going to get stuck...."

Since I remained silent, he repeated himself: "I simply warn you, brother. But of course, you are free to do as you like. It is not my concern. Oh, this is the place where I leave you now."

We had come to a Branch Post Office. Here we parted, each going his spearate way - I towards the Mirzapur Dharmasala, and he towards his home.

But in spite of Balaram-da's advice, the desire within me to attend a kirtan session kept growing; and as I walked along the road I found myself singing those lines I had heard from Nitai Bauri:

"I have just come from seeing him, o friend!
I have just come from seeing him!"

Singing these lines, I felt as joyful as if my own eyes had just witnessed his glorious beauty!

Two days later Nitai Bauri returned to the Chhatra, and to the cave at night. But somehow the warmth of our friendship was not the same as before. He was a completely changed man.

He came to the cave late at night only out of necessity, and always left with the first light of dawn; there was no chance for any exchange of words between us. When I finally did get the chance, I asked him once again to take me to the kirtans.

"I'll take you, I'll take you," he said, "What is the hurry? Let the right time come for it."

But the 'right time' never came. In fact, after my request to him, he became even more distant than before. Just as women feel awkward with their childhood friends once they are married, and try to avoid them, Nitai Bauri seemed to avoid me after he had taken initiation. At least my Punjabi friend had tried to recruit me to his path after he had been initiated; but Nitai Bauri didn't even care to bother with me. He could have encouraged me to join, simply so that I could have got the madhukari at all the chhatras easily - but no; his manner was one of condescension, as if I were a child not yet ready for the things of the adult world. This was evident to me even that very first day when I found him in the New Govinda temple. The secretive way in which he spoke of *bhek*, and of his Mohanto's place, as if he could only give me a bare hint of his new life, showed me that our previous openness wih each other had vanished.

Well, let it be vanished - what did I need with it? The one thing that did bother me, though, was my fondness for that kirtan: "I've just come from seeing him!" I could not forget that song. My fascination with hearing those kirtans went on increasing.

But curiously, throughout my life, I have repeatedly had the same kind of misfortune, whenever I try to hear kirtans; it is as if the stars in my horoscope are all against it.

During my stay in Calcutta my aesthetic sensibilities developed quite considerably, both in regard to art and to the appreciation of kirtans. There was a special hall there, where kirtans had been sung continously, day and night, for more than one hundred years - at the Company's Garden in Calcutta. I found myself spending many hours there. I did this without the permission of my maternal uncle, in whose house I was staying, and consequently suffered because of my disobedience. In spite of all discouragement, I could not seem to rid myself of my attachment to those beautiful devotional songs.

In my uncle's home there was no radio; but a few houses down the street, on the edge of the tram-line, there was a small betel-leaf beedi shop, which played its radio continuously. Even from a distance, the moment I recognised padavali kirtans about Radha and Krishna commencing on the radio, I would forget everything else; running down our flight of stairs in four jumps, I would rush towards that shop. I could not enjoy them to the full if I had to stand at a distance, so I would go very close to listen above the din of the passing trams and the busses on the road. But the moment the shopkeeper noticed me he would switch off the radio. The first few times I did not realise that he was doing it deliberately - I thought that the electricity had gone off or that he had just decided to have the radio off for a change. But one day someone else was also listening to the song; when the same thing happened again, that man detected the shopkeeper's trick immediately and started abusing him:

"Damn your radio, rascal! I was enjoying the music, but you couldn't bear that - you just switch off the radio!" And so saying, he hurled his cigarette into the street in disgust and walked off at a great speed. Then I realised, "Oh yes! So the radio did not stop by itself - the shopkeeper turned it off on purpose!"

And this was just one among many incidents that happened to me in connection with listening to kirtans. So as I considered my former friend's role in this regard, I found I could not blame him alone for it.

OK - I did not blame him - but I found myself becoming ever more determined somehow or other to hear *padavali* kirtans. Actually, Brindavan is the real home of *kirtan* - so there should have been no problem in hearing them sung there. And in fact there are assemblies in various places where women Vaishnavas sing them for twelve months and thirty days of every year. All I needed was to find out where and when they occurred. So I started to gather the needed information.

Within a few days my efforts met with success. I was sitting in the Delhi chhatra, when a gentleman I was slightly acquainted with came over to me with a stranger and behind this stranger trailed thrity or forty women! I looked up in surprise, saying,

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

My acquaintance said, "A few days ago you said that you wanted to hear kirtans. Are you still interested?"

In my heart I was wondering why such a vast entourage was required just to invite me to a kirtan session; but aloud I only said, "Yes, I'm still interested. Where will it take place?"

Indicating the man at his side, my acquaintance said,

"At his *akhra.*[8]"

"Where is his akhra in Brindavan?" I asked.

"Oh, It's not in Brindavan - it's in Navadwip,[9]" he said.

I exclaimed, "What? In Navadwip!"

"Yes, he has a large *akhra* in Navadwip," my acquaintance responded. "He is a renowned musician there. Whatever style of kirtan you wish to hear can be heard there. You could even take up singing yourself. He has come here with his group, and I remembered what you said and spoke to him about it - he agreed immediately. So go with him now."

"What are you saying? Leave Brindavan? I should go to West Bengal just to hear kirtans?"

The renowned musician of Navadwip came forward to answer my question and smilingly said,

"Yes, what's the difficulty? Come with me! There you shall hear kirtans - you will learn all sorts of kirtans from me! We are leaving tomorrow - I shall take you along with us...."

But as I looked at the renowned musician, my yearning to hear songs vanished. He was wearing black shorts and a Sandow-size black jersey. Gazing at this dwarfish, dense, dark-complexioned man I wondered,

"This man practices music? He can't be an expert in song - he looks more like a butcher!"

All the same I concealed my impressions and said to him,

"I'm sorry, I shan't be able to go to Navadwip. Can you help me to hear songs in Brindavan?"

The renowned musician seemed perplexed by this question and replied, "How is that possible? Where shall I get a harmonium here? Who will provide *banya* and *tabla*?[10] I told you, come with me to Navadwip ... there you shall hear! Don't worry about your travelling expenses; I shall bear all the expenses of your train fare, meals - all kinds of expenditure. And there you will live in my house as a member of my family ..."

I firmly demurred, saying, "Excuse me, sir ... I don't want to go to Navadwip to hear kirtans."

The gentleman who had brought the musician to me then flew into a rage at my reply and said to me,

"Then why did you dare to tell me, 'Sir, I very much want to hear kirtan. Can you tell me where kirtan performances are held?'"

He said this in such a ridiculous and comic way that the accompanying women burst into laughter.

I could not deny it. One day I had begged him for information; so there was nothing for it but to bear the ridicule. Still I retorted,

"So for penalty I have to go all the way to Navadwip to hear kirtans?"

But the gentleman turned a deaf ear to my query, continuing his lecture: "It's only because of your request that I persuaded this gentleman and his company to come here to see you! Do you know how much trouble it was even to find you? You have neither hearth nor home - I had to turn the whole of Brindavan upside down to find you. And now we have finally found you, you have the nerve to refuse me to my face!"

"I'm very sorry, Sir. If I had known that you would have to go to all this trouble for nothing, I would never have asked you for help."

Taking advantage of my apologetic tone, he continued to press his case:

"Just listen a moment ... I'm telling you this for your own good: the only way you can fill your stomach in Brindavan is by begging; but if you go to Navadwip you can live like a king. Don't let this golden opportunity slip between your fingers ... please go with him."

I had only one word for him:

"No!" I said strongly, "I don't want to listen to kirtans any more!"

Still they tried to insist, even switching to insults; and when that didn't work, they left me, finally, in complete disgust.

As they left, an older Vaishnava sadhu who had been sitting nearby and heard the whole thing, came closer to me and asked:

"How do you know these people? Are they your relatives?"

"No, Sir," I replied. "I've just met them for the first time."

"What were they saying? Why did they want to take you to Navadwip?"

"Oh, Babaji," I said, "Don't ask me ... it's a long story."

"Tell me about it, if you don't mind," he said, becoming more and more curious.

"All right, I don't mind. It was just because I wanted to hear a few kirtans that all this trouble arose."

And I recounted the whole story to him.

When he heard the whole thing, he began to blame the fellow who had brought the musician to me:

"What a shame! Who would leave Brindavan just to hear kirtan singing? There must have been some ulterior motive behind it."

"Perhaps," I said.

"It's not perhaps," he replied. "It is a certainty. There was some wrong intention behind it all. The way they were trying to force you ... if we hadn't been present to witness all this, they would surely have taken you by force, they were so determined!"

"But why should it be to their advantage to take me there?" I asked.

"They would have initiated you there, and the size of their group would have increased."

"But what if I had refused?" I asked.

"Oh, my friend!" he said, "They have methods to convince you. They are very worldly people - they know many things! First they would bring you a young girl. Didn't you see that they brought a great flock of women?"

Although this Babaji's words were true, I felt very unpleasant upon hearing them, and I cut him short:

"Oh yes, many things could have happened." I said.

"Admit this, brother!" he replied: "It is Radharani who has protected you today! Oh, Radha, beauty of Brindavan! Oh, the variety of your ways of mercy!"

And so saying, the Babaji went to join the chhatra line, and I too followed him.

From that day onwards this Babaji was very sympathetic towards me. Whenever he saw me, he would stop to say a few words.

"Do you know, brother," he would say, "The memory of that day we first met still comes to my mind. What audacity that man had, to try to force you into leaving Brindavan! He practically tried to kidnap you! But at least it was only to take you to

Navadwip ... be thankful to Radharani that he did not want to export you to Burma or Rangoon!"

And in fun I would reply, "Yes, they surely would have, if it had not been for your presence ...."

Then the Babaji would laugh with pleasure at my reply and say, "Right, right! Because we were there, they had to stop short of that!"

Weeks later, Babaji again greeted me, asking,

"So it was the aspiration to hear kirtans that got you into so much trouble! But did you finally get to hear some?"

"No, Babaji. After that I gave up the whole idea."

"Why give up the idea? There are so many places to hear kirtans here in Brindavan. Actually, in my akhra too we sometimes gather to sing them. My Vaishnavin also sings them. Would you like to hear her?"

In truth, my aspiration to hear kirtans had stayed with me. It was only because I had met with so many difficulties that I had given up all hope of ever doing so. So when he invited me, I found myself immediately accepting the offer.

"How far is it your *akhra*?" I asked him.

"Oh, it's near by," he answered. "Come, I'll show you today where it is. We will soon be having another gathering and I'll inform you ahead of time, so that you can come."

So I went with the Babaji to find his akhra. He not only showed me where it was, but invited me in as well:

"Come in, don't be in such a hurry to leave."

And so I felt obliged to go inside.

Babaji's akhra was indeed very delightful. If I had not seen its lovely well-kept courtyard of red soil for myself I would not have believed that such a place existed in Brindavan. In spite of its being a very modest abode, there was an air of wellbeing about it. As I entered the courtyard, the fragrances of Jasmine, *mogra* and *malati* greeted my senses. The combination of shade trees and delicate fragrances served to create a calm, cool, wonderful atmosphere. In the centre of the courtyard, a tulsi plant was growing on a raised platform. On the far right were clusters of marigolds, arranged by colour, each group enclosed within a bamboo screen. The yellow marigolds were especially abundant, drooping over each other with the weight of their richness. At the opposite end of the courtyard grew rows of brinjals, capsicum, chilis and lady-fingers, all then in the midst of their blooming season. Above the rooflines of a cluster of mud dwellings, the tops of four or five heavily-laden mango trees seemed to be bent down by the weight of their blossoms.

Within this enclosure stood several mud-built houses. Their floors, both inside and around their exteriors, were immaculately clean and smooth: in fact, one could sit on the ground anywhere within the whole compound without a mat.

I was about to sit down that way when Babaji stopped me, "Wait, wait... let me spread a mat. This may be a modest dwelling, but Radharani has managed to provide everything we need for our daily life."

He gave me a mat to sit on and went into one of the huts to unload the food he had brought from the chhatras, and other goods as well.

As I looked around me at the lovely scene, I thought how nice it would be to live in a place like that!

Just then I noticed a middle-aged Vaishnavi on the verandah of another house close by; she was leaning against a post and muttering *japa* (repetition of the name of God), counting by fingering a rosary within a small bag.

I realised that she must be Babaji's female partner of whom he had spoken - the one who would sing kirtans.

It was just about the time of day when all the women of my home would begin to prepare the mid-day meal; so I was surprised to see a woman employed in such an occupation at that hour - it seemed quite unusual to me.

"Yes, unusual - but why should it bother me?" I told myself. "It may be just a different system here in Brindavan. Here the responsibility for cooking is taken over by chhatras,and Babaji himself goes after the food. That must be why she has time for *japa* at this hour."

But she was not so concentrated on her *japa* that she didn't know what was going on around her. She was aware of my presence, and when our eyes met I did pranam to her; at that, she walked over to me, sat by me, and started to talk. Her demeanour was very open and frank - there was no sense of shyness about her. She addressed me as'My son' at the outset.

She asked:

"Where do you come from, and where do you stay in this place, my son?"

"West Bengal," I told her, and then described the cave where I stayed.

"How did you meet Mohanto - I mean Babaji?" she asked.

"I met him at a chhatra," I replied.

"I see. Why did you come to Brindavan? Just to tour?" she asked.

"No, Ma'am ... I came to settle here."

"Do you mean, settle permanently?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied, "That is my intention."

"Who came with you?"

"I came alone."

"Tell me why you decided to settle here," she asked with curiosity. "Whom did you leave behind at home?"

"Oh, at home? I left no one. I have no father or mother or immediate family." I replied.

"Oh...," she replied. "Now I see. That's why you have become a renunciant! But you've come on a whim, and when the glamour of it fades, you'll return to the world, won't you?"

I had been in Brindavan for many months, and in all that time noone had cross-examined me as this woman was doing. The only other examiner I had found was that Swamiji at the Bharat Sevashram. But since her queries were asked as a mother would ask them, even though I had kept all this to myself for so long, her questioning brought it all forth from deep within me. I proceeded to tell her of my real intention:

"No, it was not on a whim that I came. I have really come to Brindavan to reside here for ever. I've roamed in many places, such as Gaya, Kashi, Prayag and so on; but nowhere did I find a place where I feel most at home. The sky, the air and every grain of sand are permeated with a special joy. It is everywhere. Since my arrival here, I have never once had my fill of food and my lodging has not been so suitable - yet never did it overwhelm me. The atmosphere is so extraordinary, there is such a joy that I feel here...."

The Vaishnavi at once cried out,

"Ah, yes, of course, my son! Brindavan is really extraordinary. There is a special joy here. No one remains unhappy in Radharani's Brindavan. She takes care of all of us and bestows such happiness upon us! Victory to Radha! Victory to Govinda!"

Raising her folded hands to her forehead, she acknowledged her gratitude to Radha and Krishna.

After a few moment's silence she asked again,

"Well, my son, there are so many chhatras offering food and so many ashram-monasteries in Brindavan for accommodation; so why do you say that you have not found your needs adequately met?"

"How shall I get them? I am not a Vaishnava or a sadhu," I replied, "and these facilities are meant mainly for them."

She agreed with me:

"Yes, it's true. As a matter of fact, these days there are so many outsiders that even sadhus and Vaishnavas have trouble in filling their stomachs."

"Anyway, in Brindavan sadhus won't meet hardship - the difficulty is for people like me." I replied.

During this whole conversation she had continued to count the beads on her *mala* or rosary, within its bag. Again she fell silent for a few moments, and then began thinking aloud:

"Poor fellow! You're so young. Is this the right age for you to be initiated? And if you don't become a disciple, you won't be properly fed here. You have not even had a real taste of life's experiences yet. How old can you be? Not more than 17 or 18...."

From the first, she had seen me as very young. That was why she had addressed me as 'my son'. Of course I did not say so, but since she saw me as a child, I became concerned that she might not agree to sing kirtans to such a youngster. So to prove that I was not just a boy I said emphatically,

"Oh, I'm not as young as you think. I'm just twenty years of age."

But my protests went unregarded. The Vaishnavi said, "But I see that you are still very immature...."

Just then Babaji came out of the room and asked the Vaishnavi, "Who is still immature? About whom are you speaking?"

The Vaishnavi at once turned away from me and, ignoring his question, demanded,

"Oh, Mohanto, are you really going to initiate such a young boy?"

"What young boy are you talking about? Are you referring to this man here with the nine-inch beard and moustache?" he asked. "Do you know he was about to be taken off to Navadwip to be married, and you call him a young boy? What nonsense are you talking?"

As he was speaking, Babaji pulled up a mat and sat down on the ground between us.

"But you haven't answered my question," the Vaishnavi persisted. "Did you bring him here to be initiated?"

Babaji grew annoyed. "Why are you asking me? He is the one who should answer this question."

The Vaishnavi said, "Whoever answers the question, I won't let it happen. He's just a lad. His whole life is before him. If ever he wishes to return home and wants to marry, shouldn't he be able to do that? No, no Mohanto, just to gain a few slices of bread here, you don't spoil his future, please!"

Now Babaji lost his patience.

"Ah ! What a nuisance!" he replied bitterly. "You know nothing about this, yet you go on talking as if you do! Do you think I have pulled him here against his will to initiate him?"

At this the Vaishnavi calmed down immediately. She controlled herself and said,

"I did not mean that, Mohanto. Why would you pull him here? But I can see that he himself is in need of help. Perhaps he himself will take initiation in order to procure his food in Brindavan."

Suddenly I felt a jolt - as if someone had dealt me a heavy slap on my cheek and said, "See? You still don't understand what's going on? Will you sit there like a piece of wood in shame at the mention of your nine-inch beard and moustache? Here you sit ashamed and embarrassed while they plan your future for you. Wake up, young man, and get out of here!"

Really, all that talk about my beard and so on had embarrassed me into sitting there half-stunned, unable to say a word. But with this sudden jolt, I at once stood up to confront them:

"N-no! No! What are you saying? I d-didn't c-come here for i-initiation.... I-I-I came here to hear k-kirtans!"

All at once I had become a stammerer: I could not speak properly. And to save myself, I rushed out of the place as fast as my feet would take me.

If I had stayed there and continued my connection with them, who knows what might have happened to me?

I don't know who that compassionate Vaishnava woman was who went against her own kind to save me--a complete stranger - from such dire consequences. Surely someone was watching over me!

Notes and Reference

1. The Water in which the foot of the deity has been washed, - charanamrita.

2. In his novel Saratchandra describes a Vaishnava monastery in which there are many female devotees, one of whom is called 'Kamal Lata'. This name means a lotus, or a lotus-creeper. So here the author is making a pun, speaking of a monastery full of female Vaishnavas as a forest full of lotuses.

3. Bhek means initiation in Vaishnavite cult.

4. Mohanto - the term indicates a Vaishnava preceptor, or the head of a Vaishnava monastery.

5. Kunja means literally a grove or garden ; but it also refers to a Vaishnava ashram or monastery.

6. Radha is telling her girl friend that she has just come from seeing Krishna - perhaps Radha has just fallen in love with Krishna at first sight ... that is why she can't help pouring out all her emotion to her friend!

7. Padavali means a wreth of stanzas ... a set of Vaishnavite poems in praise of Radha-Krishna; padavali kirtan is the sung form of those poems.

8. Akhra - A place for Vaishnavite religious performances.

9. Navadwip: the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya, situated in West Bengal - 1500 or 2000 miles from Brindavan!

10. Banya and tabla: musical instruments used to mark the rhythm in singing.

11. Female companion.

Chapter Nine

So history had once again repeated itself - just as in Calcutta, my difficulties about hearing kirtans had manifested here in Brindavan too ; the enjoyment of padavali kirtan was once more denied me.

I discovered that I could survive without kirtans. But without bread, I could not. One by one the doors of the chhatras of Brindavan closed to me. It was because I did not fit into an identifiable category : I was neither an ochre-robed sannyasi nor a Vaishnava - nor did anyone take me for a professional beggar. I wore a dhoti folded up to the waist, a banian or vest, and over it a new saffron-coloured handloom shawl. My healthy constitution had earned me the nickname of 'Chunky' in my village, and that description was still quite appropriate, for during my months in Mathura Jail I had been fed coarse chappatis, whole lentils, raw cabbage leaves and other 'delicacies' which had increased my already vigorous health - so who could mistake me for a beggar?

Well, perhaps I wasn't a beggar, but couldn't people have taken me for some kind of a saintly person? Wasn't the fact that I wore a saffron-coloured shawl sufficient to suggest where I was headed? But no! No one mistook my saffron shawl for that of a sannyasi. This was because I had made a very serious mistake a couple of months earlier while I was in Prayag. Only for that reason no one would afford me the benefits accorded to saints and sannyasis, even by mistake. If I had only known all the trouble it would cause me later, I never would have done it.

And actually, I did not do it of my own accord. My mistake was to try to please the people around me, to do as they were doing.

From the moment I reached Prayag, I had heard pilgrims and visitors there remark:

"It is due to Mother Ganga's grace that we have been allowed to come to this sacred place. Therefore it should be our first and foremost duty to shave our heads and offer Her our hair. This is the opportunity of a lifetime. We family people may never be allowed to return here again. So before we leave, let us have our heads shaved."

Then someone garnered an unerring saying from the scriptures and said,

"It says that shaving one's head when one reaches the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna gives full meaning to the pilgrimage and allows one's quest to be fulfilled. It purifies the pilgrimage. So it advises the pilgrims:

"First in Prayag have your head shaved,
Then, pilgrim, go wherever you like."

After this, personal preferences were beside the question. Even those who were still hesitating whether to offer their heads to the barbers became very enthusiastic at this saying from the scriptures. When even handsome young women in our group were surrendering their silky black tresses to the blades of the butcher-barber, how could I resist? I too offerred my insignificant hair to be barbered.

But when I reached Brindavan, I had to repent:

"Oh, what a blunder I committed that day! If only I had saved my hair - even if Ihad to pay the barbers to do it - it would have stood me in good stead today in the chhatra-queues of Brindavan!"

For Isaw many people in the line there who were not saints– they were dressed just like me; but just because they had long hair and beards they looked just like natural saints - and were treated like saints! I too would have received that treatment and nothing would have hindered me from being invited for *mughlai paratha* and other such delicacies in Brajabasis' homes!

Well, let it go - what had to happen had happened. Now only one way was left to me to procure food without living in some ashram or monastery, or without becoming an initiate like my companions. That was to imitate the refugees - to dye my clothes with *Khun-kharapi* - saffaron colour It would not even cost much .....only a matter of couple of paise.

But l just could not do it ....because l knew that my guru, Sri Aurobindo, had no ochre robe. Although at that time l had not seen any inmates of the Pondicherry ashram, there was a Sri Aurobindo Pathamandir in our village - and the members and devotees there dressed like ordinary people. Besides, l had read about Sri Aurobindo's ideal in books. The last time as l had come through Calcutta, l had read in the wall-magazine beside Azad Hind Park some words of Sri Aurobindo :

"One has to do everything like an ordinary man, even after dining on nectar to one's fill. Our aim is transformation of our whole nature - the supramental perfection. Our renunciation is not external, but internal. We do not want renunciation of the world, we want internal abandonement of desire, ignorance and egoism."

With this as the goal, then how could l dye my clothes?

So l began to look for a job. I did not want to take food any more without working for it. I felt ashamed to take food from chhatras. My nature tends towards Karmayoga—union with God through work. So l wanted to work for my food.

But here the difficulty was that l was new to Brindavan. No one knew me, so who would give me a job?

"Well, anyway," l thought, "Whatever work comes my way, let me give it a try."

Just at the time when these ideas were passing through me, I was noticed by the manager of the Mirzapur Dharmashala as l stood in the line along with saints and beggars. Not only did he notice me, he recognised me as a Bengalee - he saw that l felt ashamed to beg, even though l was very hungry.

He singled me out of that whole group of seventy or eighty sannyasis and beggar and asked me in HIndi :

"What is this, Bengali? Such a young man asking for food? Come, why not do some work here ?"

I immediately stepped forward and showed my zeal :

"Oh, yes, sir! Surely I will ! Give me some work to do."

The manager, whose name was Sharmaji, replied,

"All right, come with me."

He called me inside the Dharmashala. Then, glancing up at the clock on the wall, he asked me,

"What work can you do? Now it's the time for marketing. Can you go to the market to buy vegetables?"

"Yes, I can," I replied, "but I don't know the current prices."

"All right, come with me. Let's go together," he said.

And off we went. I carried the empty bags and the manager filled them with vegetables as we went along. Then we returned to the chhatra with the bags full.

There the manager opened the bags, took out a few things for his personal use and then gave the rest to the Chhatra kitchen for the next day's cooking. He handed me a separate small bag of vegetables and pointed towards another room,

"Take this over there," he said, "to Sumitaji. Ask her if she has any work for you."

Sumitaji lived in a couple of big rooms just near the front gate of the chhatra. She had with her only one six or seven-year old daughter named Radha. She had observed what was happening from her window. As I entered the room she took the vegetable bag from me, and asked,

"Can you do household work?"

"I know a little bit about it," I told her.

"Good. First, then, cut the vegetables. You are so late in coming from the market - how will I have time to cook?"

As I began to cut the spinach leaves, little Radha was watching. She said to her mother,

"See, Mummy, let me cut some vegetables like that."

"Oh no," her mother replied. "Come over here with me, Radha." And she left the room.

But Radha didn't follow her mother. She stayed and cut vegetables with me. Although I was a stranger to her, she was not shy and began to ask me questions :

"Where are you staying?" she inquired.

"I'm staying here in the Dharmashala," I told her.

"But I've never seen you before," she remarked.

Just as I was about to tell her that I had never seen her before either, her mother re-entered the room. She noticed the way I was cutting the vegetables and said,

"Oh no, not this way. It's not correct." And she took them away from me. "Do you know how to peel these potatoes?"

"Yes, " I replied, "I do."

She handed me the potatoes and left for the kitchen. And so I began to peel them. Little Radha helped me too, peeling them with her tiny finger-nails. She watched what I was doing. "Oh no," she said, "Do it as I do" - and she pulled my hand away from the cutter; in the process I cut my hand !

Radha called out, "Mummy, mummy, come quickly ! He has cut his hand instead of the potato!"

"Whose hand is cut? Why are you there?" cried Sumitaji coming hurriedly from the kitchen.

"Oh, its nothing," I replied, "It's just a little cut."

"No, just leave it all alone! And is this your potato-peeling? You are good for nothing. I'll tell Sharmaji that there is no need for you to help."

I felt terrified and said,

"No, no, please don't tell Sharmaji. Then he will dispense with my services at once!"

"No! I must tell him to discharge you - what work will you do for me?"

But as she spoke, she was trying to keep herself from laughing. At first I had felt frightened; but when I saw the smile that she was trying to hide I felt that she would say nothing about what had happened.

"Then give me some other work," I said.

"What kind of work? Do you know how to cook?" she asked.

"Yes, I can fry potatos and greens - and yes, I can cook *patol* soup."

"What did you say? *Patol* soup?"

"Yes, it's very popular in our Bengal. I can cook fine patol soup with cardamom, cloves and cinnamon. I learnt that on my way here, in the Calcutta mess."

"But where shall I get Patol for you in Brindavan? Relieve me, you need not cook for me! Better do what you can...."

And saying this, she brought out two chappatis and a piece of molasses on a plate which she placed before me. She said,

"You will get your meal in the kitchen of the chhatra; this is for your refreshment. Take it and then tell Sharmaji that you have finished Sumitaji's work."

I was so relieved at having finished my work that a great happiness welled up within me. Unable to eat at that moment, I took the food and started to leave.

"Wait," she called out to me. "Listen, just because I have let you go now, it does not mean that all the work is finished. Come before evening - I have a special job for you then."

"All right" I replied, and went out into the kitchen of the chhatra.

Two workers belonging to the chhatra had just been waiting for this moment. As soon as I entered the kitchen, they rushed forward and congratulated me as if I had just returned from winning a great battle. They cried,

"Come, oh come, Bengali ! Shake hands with us !"

"Why should I shake hands unnecessarily?" I replied.

They said, "Because your luck is very good, brother !"

Still I was reluctant, and delayed shaking hands with them:

"Why all the fuss? Why do you think my luck is good? Why do you want to shake my hand?"

Then one of them grabbed my hand and twisted it so hard that I cried out in pain.

"Ouch ! Please leave my hand alone ! You're going to break it!"

"What?" he taunted me, "the Bengali's hand is so soft that a litle squeeze will break it?"

By this time the other fellow had reached out for my other hand - he cried out :

Oh Look ! He's even getting bread ! My, my, my ! That's why he's trying to hide his hand!"

To conceal my embarrassment I pretended to be angry:

"What's wrong with it? I did some work for Sharmaji - can he not give me two slices of bread for that ?"

"But Sharmaji did not give you these. Some other person gave them to you - isn't it true?"

"It's all the same - what's the difference?" I asked.

"Come, come, don't get upset," they teased me. "We're simply asking. O.K. Bread for work we understand - but didn't Sumitaji tell you to meet her again in the evening?"

"Yes," I admitted. "I have been told to meet her this evening. But why? What work will she give me?"

"Oh, no need to worry about the work! Whatever work she gives, you will be very good."

"Then why are you laughing?"

"We are laughing at your luck!" they explained. "From the moment you came, Sharmaji has been giving you special treatment. You become his favourite, his pet. He immediately gave you work in his private rooms. We have never been sent inside there even on the smallest errand. Instead he keeps a very close eye on us."

"Why does he watch you so carefully?" I asked.

"Because he keeps his third wife in there."

"That's absurd! What are you talking about? You mean that Sumitaji, whose work I did, is Sharmaji's wife ? There's a difference of at least forty years between her age and Sharmaji's!"

"It's true, brother. Sumitaji is Sharmaji's wife. Just ask Munshi here whether it's true or not....."

The other one, Munshi, verified the whole thing:

"Yes, Bengali!" This is why Sharmaji is so careful with her. I am the private secretary of our manager, Sharmaji's boss, and I often go inside his house where his wife speaks with me and discusses various decisions to be made. But Sharmaji doesn't trust me either. Nevertheless, he has asked me to begin tutoring his daughter Radha, beginning from next month. Isn't it rather strange?"

"Why strange?" I asked.

"It is strange, Bengali," he replied, "because for the last two years he has been telling me : 'Let Radha grow up a bit, then you will be her private tutor. Why did you discontinue your studies after completing the middle-school course? Take up your studies again, I shall help you - I shall arrange for you to get free boarding in the chhatra, like students of Sanskrit academies. I shall pay you some expenses too. Do resume your studies. Have you grown old? What does it matter? Is there any age-limit for learning? Study privately and at least pass the school final examination. Aren't you aware of the severe hardship that your mother in undergoing?'......"

"But Sharmaji is thinking of your own good. Do start studying again - it will be good for you", I said.

"Oh, no! No way!" he retorted "He's just talking. He doesn't really mean it. It's just a trick to rectify my character and keep me in line so that I don't enter his private quarters and cause him trouble! I know very well what is behind it all. I'm not a fool. Wait and see for yourself. Well, you just worked near Sumitaji for quite a long time.....but was Sharmaji with you?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "He wasn't there. He left for some other work."

"So you can understand my case," he replied. "When we go in, Sharmaji stays with us. Can you imagine how awkward it becomes? How impolite he is?"

I could not think of anything to say to console him. I thought perhaps his complaint might not be groundless. If she was Sharmaji's third wife, he might need to be a little vigilant about these matters.

"Who is your manager, brother? Where does he stay?" I asked Munshi.

"You have been coming to this chhatra for a long time - don't you know who the actual manager is?" he asked. "It's not Sharmaji. He is the assistant to the manager. He is on salary just as we are. The real manager in charge stays upstairs with his wife, and we seldom see them. They're quite inaccessible."

"Then you two are actually working for the manager and not for Sharmaji?" I asked them.

Munshi replied, "No. Only I work for the manager, and this fellow Deodhar works for the chhatra under Sharmaji. There was another person - his hand turned septic after being bitten by a monkey. That poor fellow has gone home, and actually you have been appointed in his place."

Then Deodhar asked me, "Will you be here permanently, or just for a few days?"

"Oh no, I will remain here. I'm not planning to leave," I replied.

"Really, do you mean it? Keep your word!" he said.

"Yes," I replied, I'll keep my word. But if that old employee returns, won't I have to go away?"

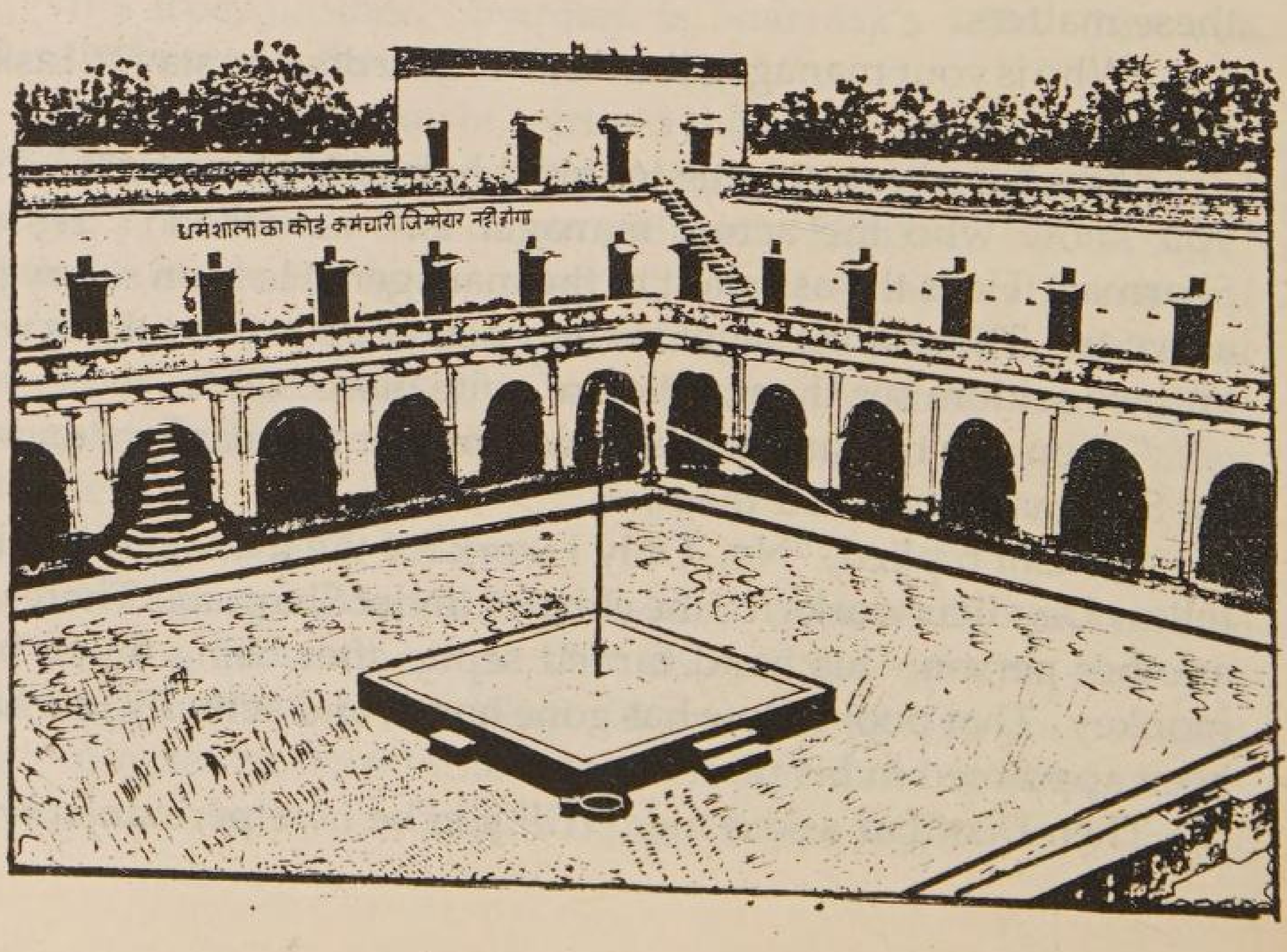
"He won't come back. You need not worry."

I said, "In any case there's no security. I haven't made any contract with Sharmaji for permanent work. Well, we've spent so much time chatting here.....why hasn't Sharmaji come to give me more work?"

Munshi was called away for some work and left us. Deodhar answered my question:

"Sharmaji told me that you would work with me. You should clean the whole Dharmashala and its courtyard properly now. Will you be able to draw water from the tub in the garden and bring it here?"

I was shocked to hear that I was to clean that whole Dharmashala. It was really a large area and it would require the water


धर्मशाला का कोई कर्मचारी जिम्मेदार नहीं होगा

of the whole pond to wash it all clean. The courtyard in the middle of the house was as large as two football fields. And all around that courtyard were two-storied buildings. There was a specious long verandah both above and below. So, would a little water suffice to wash out so many rooms and buildings as well as the courtyard itself?

As a matter of fact, unless one sees it with one's own eyes,.no one can guess the hundredth part of what a gigantic size and form that Mirzapur Dharmashala had, just by reading this description or seeing a picture of it on the page of a book. But can everyone go to Brindavan - either by spending their own money or travelling without a ticket like me ? Just for this, I would like to give each of my readers the money to go to Brindavan ! Let them see the huge dimensions of that Dharmashala with their own eyes. It's really worth the trip to Brindavan just to see the size of that Dharmashala!

But kindly do not think that I want to send you all to Brindavan at my own cost simply to show you the hardship I had to undergo to clean a Dharmashala of that gigantic size that day! No, Sirs! That is not the reason. But only think, there are many rich men...but how many can afford to build a palace all around the Esplanade of Calcutta? So in this modern age of miserly close-fisted imagination, one is truly astonished to see such a superflously large and sky-kissing mansion - one would surely wish to show it to others! This is why I make such a point of it.

But whatever the reason, when I heard that I should have to wash so much, I said to Deodhar,

"Well, have you enough water to wash out all the rooms and the courtyard? Will a tub of water suffice?"

Deodhar said, "Yes, It will be sufficient. And if it is not, I shall start the pumps; plenty of water will gush out from under the ground."

But even when I heard that there was no water-problen , I still felt no enthusiasm.

I said to Deodhar, "Why so much hurry? Is there any need to make such haste? What about doing half of it today, and the other half tomorrow?"

"No, brother," Deodhar replied, "That won't do. Sharmaji's order was to clean the whole area today itself, because of a meeting that is to be held here. Within two or three days many people will begin to arrive."

"What kind of a meeting?" I asked him. "And where will they all come from?"

"It's a meeting of the Jana Sangha," he said. "All the members from Northern India - Punjab, Delhi, Agra, Mathura, etc. will come marching on foot to this very Dharmashala."

"Will there be any members coming from Bengal?" I asked.

Deodhar looked at me in surprise. "How could they come? This is a North Indian meeting. Bengal is not included."

"Oh, really?" I asked.

"If the Bengali members were to come, where would they stay? There aren't enough rooms here for everyone," he said. "There are eight to ten thousand members in the North Indian group alone - so you can understand why they are not included. And because of these new arrivals, the area must be cleaned today itself. So let's finish the work however we can. You bring the water and I will pour it."

So after lunch we began.

I filled two large buckets of water from the Dharmashala's pond and carried them in both hands to Deodhar; whereupon he held the full buckets high above his head and in an instant sprinkled all the water around and emptied them both. He finished his part in two seconds. Then he sat down and waited until I brought water again.

Deodhar was a Maharastrian; his figure was just like a wrestler's : broad chest, stout thighs and muscles - his biceps and triceps were worth seeing! This sort of task was just like a sport to him. And, moreover, he had chosen the right task. The water I required ten or fifteen minutes to fetch, he emptied within two seconds - after that he had only to sit and wait. I simply could not keep up with him - and pretty soon I was exhausted. My hands and legs felt heavy and stuck in the mud. But I said nothing. After all, this was my first day on the job - what would they think? That I was not up to the work?

It seemed that the job would never end. After working the whole afternoon, we had cleaned only the courtyard and one verandah. It was a moonlit night; besides there was electric light....Deodhar spoke of working into the night as well. My hands and legs were aching so much that I could hardly move, but still I could not refuse. I only prayed to God that something would happen to save me.

And just then, all of a sudden, Sumitaji appeared on the scene like personified Grace!

"Bengali!" she called, "Don't you remember that I asked you to come again in the afternoon? Did you forget?"

"No, Ma'am," I replied, 'but what could I do? I was so involved in this cleaning that I could not leave. I can't leave until the whole Dharmashala is washed."

"Leave all this," she said in a commanding tone, "and come with me!"

I went at once. Deodhar had been about to object, when he heard Sumitaji's order to me. The other young man, Munshi, had also come down to watch the fun, standing there on the verandah. we walked right passed the two of them, and proceeded on towards the garden behind the Dharmashala.

As we went, Sumitaji began to address me in a gentle voice:

"Are they working you hard?" she asked. "When a new man is appointed, they always make him labour in that way. Sharmaji didn't tell them to give all the work to you. I heard him tell them to appoint several other people from outside to get all the work done."

Encouraged by this, my voice became stronger. I replied,

"I did not know that. They told me that Sharmaji had ordered me to do it all."

"That is Deodhar's trick," she said. "if you can put up with it just for two days during the meeting, then it will all resolve itself - after the meeting there will be little left to do."

"Listen, I'm not afraid of work," I told her. "I've made up my mind to try anything - only I need to work by myself. Please tell

Sharmaji that I will stay on and would like to be given an on-going job, not just temporary work."

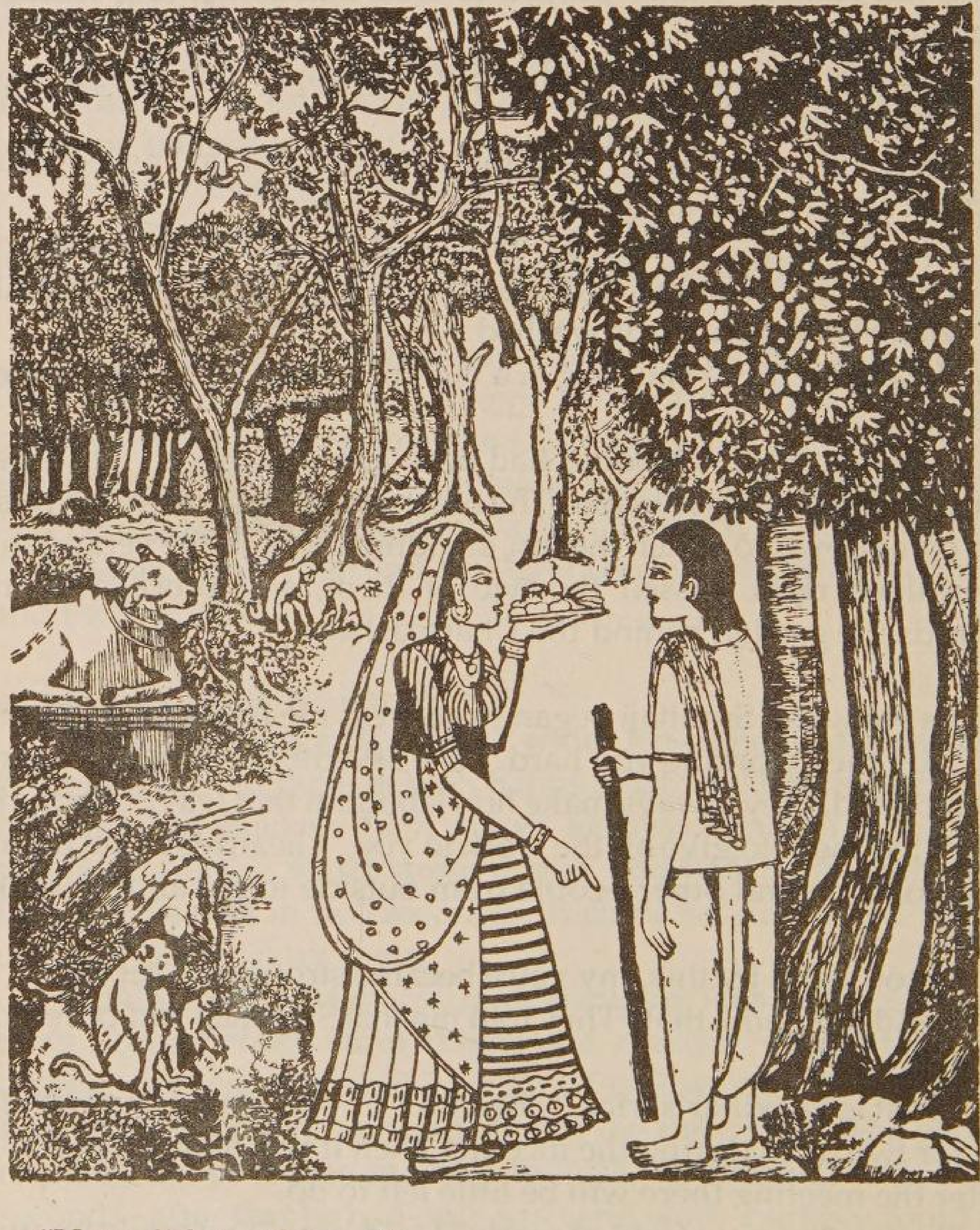
"I'll try," she said briefly, and then went on to ask me:

"Do you know where we are going?"

"Yes" I replied.

"Where?" she asked.

"To the temple," I said.



"How did you know?"

"Because of the puja articles - conch, bell, utensils, etc., that you are carrying," I replied. "I just assumed that you were going for worship in some temple."

"Yes, you've guessed correctly," she said. "There are so many monkeys here in Brindavan, and they often come and grab the flowers and fruit-offerings right out of our hands. That is why I requested you to accompany me."

"Ah !" I replied. "I understand. I too met with the local monkeys on my very first day in Brindavan. At the Bharat Sevashram when I sat down to eat, a monkey appeared out of nowhere, grabbed a handful of rice from my plate and vanished within a moment! The brazenness of these monkeys is truly remarkable!"

"It is not an ordinary brazenness," she replied. "They have absolutely no fear. They fight with men and grab food right out of their hands - they snatch away small children and climb up into trees with them. Have you ever heard of anything like that before? So, will you be able to protect my temple-offering from those scoundrels?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said, "I can protect you."

"Then find a big stick and carry it with you," she told me. "That is one thing which will keep them away."

As she waited, I went into the Dharmashala kitchen and found a large stick to take with me. Then I followed her to the temple.

As we went along we could see a number of monkeys looking down at us from the trees, but they did not dare to come any closer because of the big stick.

The magnificent building had an equally magnificent garden...not a mere garden, but a whole forest. I was amazed at the enormous trees with their luxuriant foliage. The shade of these densely-crowding trees was so deep that the afternoon suddenly became early evening. As we followed the narrow path between them, it seemed as if the path were a thin parting in a thick hair of head. We were immersed in the midst of it. Finally we came to a clearing. A small temple lay directly in front of us, with a small pond to one side. On the opposite side was a rich grove of flowering trees - Bel, Jasmine, Togor and so on- to be used in daily puja.

Sumitaji went over there to collect flowers for her worship, while I drew water from the pond for the same purpose. Then she opened the temple door and went inside. She came back out, carrying a gong and a wooden hammer and handed them to me.

"One should not sit idle during the puja. When I start greeting the deity by waving the lamp and sound the conch and the bell, you beat the gong," she said.

"All right" I replied, taking them from her.

"Do you know how to beat it?" Sumitaji asked me.

"Is there any special method to it?"

"Yes - if you just beat it carelessly, it will not sound as it should. First touch the hammer to the left side of the gong, then to the right, and last to the bottom. If you do that, the sound of 'Ra-dhe-Shyam' will come."

"Really?" I asked. "The sound of 'Ra-dhe-Shyam' will come?"

"Try it and see," she said. "But remember, if you strike it incorrectly, it won't happen."

"Oh no, I'll follow your directions," I told her

I took the gong and stood outside the temple door, wondering if I would be able to get the desired result. Sumitaji sat on a meditation mat on the temple floor, performing a series of rituals, just as the priests do. When all these were completed she lit the *pancha pradeep* a holder containing five flames - and circled it in front of the god with one hand while with the other she rang the bell.

At the same time I struck the gong as instructed, first to the left, then the right and then down; and sure enough, it came: 'Ra-dhe-Shyam' - over and over again. The gong sounded 'Ra' when struck on the left, 'dhe' when struck on the right, and 'Shyam' when struck below.

I could hardly believe my ears. It sounded just as she had said it would, over and over. I tried to hear some other sound in various ways ... sometimes with a sceptical attitude, sometimes absent mindedly, often stilling the brain that understands the meaning of sounds - but only 'Ra-dhe-Shyam' came, again and again!

And what an enticing sound, which filled the heart and mind! I could not understand how it had happened, but I could feel that sound awakening some deep feeling within my heart.

I was reminded of a similar gong used in my village during both Kali and Durga pujas. But there the result had been quite different; there was somehow a difference in the atmosphere ... or was it the 'glory of the place'?

Anyway, when the puja was completed, Sumitaji came out with the articles used for worship and locked the temple door.

I asked her, "Don't you have a little prasad (blessed food) for me?"

"I'll give you some when we reach home," she replied.

"I would prefer to have the prasad right here in the courtyard,"I told her.

"All right" she said, and handed me a milk sweet, Sandesh, as prasad. As I placed it in my mouth, I noticed that this had somehow made her very happy.

Then we started back. Sumitaji led the way through the dark woods, the puja articles in her hand: the conch shell, the cymbals, the bell and the lamp of five fires, and other things. I asked her,

"Why are you taking these things home with you? Won't you use them here again tomorrow?"

"Yes," she said, "But they must be cleaned and there are no facilities here for doing it."

"Then give them to me," I said. "I'll carry them."

As I spoke I reached out my hand, and she was about to give them to me gladly; but the bell fell down onto the cemented path, and such was my ill-luck that the clapper inside got separated.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "You broke it!"

I hastily picked up the two broken parts of the bell, saying, "Don't worry, please ... I will get it mended ... it can be wired together so that it will work again."

But Sumitaji was inconsolable, angrily demanding,

"Why did you take it from me in the first place? I didn't ask you to do it. How can you be so bold? Even that huge Deodhar crouches in fear when he comes to me. He never dares to take things out of my hands. He would wait until I put them down! And you simply snatched them out of my hands! Is that all the respect you have for me?"

"Why should I have to respect all those formalities?" I asked her. "I don't see you only as a woman or as the wife of Sharmaji. No, I see you as a 'Brajangana' [2] - as one of Sri Krishna's gopis!"

"What did you call me? What am I?"

"A Brajangana ... you are a Brajangana."

"Really? I am a Brajangana?" - and she began to laugh aloud.

It was difficult to understand Sumitaji's moods. Just a minute ago she had been very angry - and now she was laughing uncontrollably.

"Why are you laughing like this?" I asked her. "I just read in a book about the Brajanganas ... about those lovers who secretly creep out to the place of assignation, for Sri Krishna's sake. But I did not know what that actually looks like. Now I have the good fortune to be companion to a real Brajangana, so that I can experience it all for myself. No one in the world is as lucky as I am!"

Again Sumitaji laughed.

"What?" she asked, "What did you say? You are lucky!" and she went on laughing aloud.

As we went our way through the trees, it was as if the whole forest became alive, responding to the sound of her laughter. But we were not alone.

From a distance, Sharmaji heard Sumitaji's laughter and came to meet us.

He asked her, "What's the matter? Why are you laughing so much?"

"What do you say, Bengali?" she smiled, "shall I tell Sharmaji?"

Up to this moment I had not considered how things might look - but now I felt apprehensive: Oops! Everything down the drain! "What will become of my job? Oh, if only she would lose her voice right now!" I thought.

But no! Sumitaji seemed to grow more animated. She replied to Sharmaji: "It is a very serious matter, Mr. Sharmaji! Well, You know me only as Radha's mother, don't you?"

"Yes, Why?"

"No.Nothing has happened ... but did you know that now I have another title? Do you know what this Bengali has called me?"

"What has the Bengali said?" asked Sharmaji.

I could not guess whether there was rage or only curiosity in his voice.

"Bengali tells me that I am a Brajangana," Sumitaji answered. "Am I really?"

"Of course," - Sharmaji seemed to seize hold of the word at once: "That's true! You live here in Braja - then what else are you but a Brajangana? There is nothing new in what the Bengali has said."

"But I have never heard it from your mouth! Even today you wouldn't have thought of it if the Bengali had not said it. From now on, you too must call me 'Brajangana!'"

And again she burst into loud laughter.

As we emerged from the wood, my two friends saw me coming with Sharmaji and his wife, laughing as we went. Perhaps this sight irritated them very much. At dinner that night I got the proof that it must have annoyed them.

As we sat down for our meal in the Chhatra kitchen, Deodhar said to me,

"Bengali, today you had a holiday, but we'll see how you can escape tomorrow!"

"What?" I asked. "What tasks will you give me tomorrow?"

"You will see for yourself soon enough!" Was all he would say.

Although we exchanged only these few words, an undercurrent of unpleasant feelings was exchanged as well.

And the next day was quite an ordeal. How I would have love another 'holiday' instead! Deodhar gave me a downstairs storeroom in the Dharmasala to clean. As he opened the door he told me,

"Sharmaji said that this room must be cleaned out today."

Never in my life had I seen such a dirty room. When the building was constructed, all the waste materials had been thrown in there. In addition, it was very dark and very damp. It seemed that the room had never been used, and I wondered what Deodhar could possibly need it for now. Well, only he would be able to answer that.

I said, "There's so much junk! How can I ever empty this room?"

"Oh, you won't be alone - I will be here to help you. You get started .. I will come soon."

And with these words he went away.

I tried my best to clean the room, and I decided I would not let Deodhar get me down. If I could show him that I was willing, and able to do this without a fuss, perhaps he would leave me alone and things would return to normal.

And that is exactly what happened. When he saw that I quietly went ahead with the cleaning, he himself came and began to help me carry heavy pieces out of the room.

I did not see Sumitaji all that day, and I thought it was just as well.

"If I give up going for puja, and work here instead," I thought, "Deodhar will be much happier. Besides, how could she know where I am today? She's on the other side of the compound."

It was evident that Deodhar did not want me to go with Sumitaji. But when the time for puja came, Sumitaji searched the whole Dharmasala, and finally came to that room. She understood Deodhar's trick immediately; she laughed and said,

"Oh, Bengali ! You have been hidden to escape my detection! I'm exhausted from searching this whole Dharmasala!"

"What could I do?" I answered. "Deodhar told me that Sharmaji had ordered me to do all this."

At the mention of Sharmaji's name, Sumitaji fell silent; then after a moment she said to me,

"All right ... just come with me now."

I followed her at once. She glanced back at me and told me to find a stick to carry as I had done the previous day. I found one , picked it up and followed her.

Sumitaji gathered all the items for the puja and then set out for the garden. She did not say a word about the bell which had been broken the day before, and had already obtained a new one from the market. When we came close to the temple she stopped to gather flowers from the surrounding grove, while I collected water from the pond, just as we had done the previous day. Then she gave me the brass gong and its hammer and indicated that I should strike it as I had done the day before.

By the time that the puja was completed, we found that evening had already come. She locked the temple door and then gave me prasad of her own accord, without my asking.

I noticed that after the puja she would become much more calm and quiet. It seemed that the effect of the puja was to quieten her mind; and I respected this spiritual change which would come over her. Although she had no mantra, her puja brought tears to her eyes; I think that when this happens, the gods must be listening; and because it had this effect on her, I found myself wanting to know more about her puja.

So as she distributed the prasad I asked her,

"Normally the priest utters a mantra as he performs the puja. Why is yours so silent? Don't you have a mantra?"

She replied with a smile,

"My mantra is recited within me, in my mind."

I responded, "Not only in your mind, but with the moisture of your eyes as well. Sumitaji, what is the difficulty that brings tears to your eyes?"

She replied with the same smile,

"Do you really want to know? Because my problem has no solution. Do you not know that my husband is very elderly? Everyone else can see my problem. Why have you not noticed it?"

Her reply to my question came completely unexpectedly. I was dumbfounded... what would she tell me next? I looked at her: was she serious or was she joking?

I did not know what to say, but I had to say something; so I asked her:

"Why do you expect me to know what all the others know about you? After all, I'm new here!"

"But," she queried, "if I ask you one question, will you be truthful with me ?"

Hesitatingly I accepted her condition.

She began, "Do you feel any pity for me?"

"But," I interrupted her, "why are you confiding this to me?"

She replied, "This is not something I would tell everyone; only to you, because I felt your compassion."

I was quite surprised ... what would Sharmaji's wife tell me next? I replied quite forcefully:

"Why are you speaking to me in this way? About sympathy for you, I don't know, but I have respect for you... especially for your devotion to Krishna. I'm newcomer to Brindavan, and I have never before seen anyone like you, and I feel I have much to learn from you..."

Sumitaji drew herself back.

"What could I ever teach you? People only look on me with pity. I have an elderly, sickly husband . Any day he may leave me!"

Now I understood what she meant. I did feel compassion for her, and asked,

"Is Sharmaji ill? It doesn't appear so."

"Yes, I know," she replied. "But he is a heart patient. He has already had two heart attacks."

"Oh, two attacks already! No wonder people sympathize with you. But I knew nothing about it, so why did you come to me for sympathy?"

She did not answer my question. Instead she replied,

"But they do not know that I am his third wife. No one forced me. It was my own choice."

"Your parents did not arrange it - you have married Sharmaji by your own will?"

At this question, her answers tumbled out rapidly:

"No, it was my own choice," she said. "There was some family influence, but that was not the main reason for the marriage. You see, when I was quite small, my mother passed away, and I was sent to my aunt's home to be raised. Then my father began to drink and did not support the family. He had no job. Slowly everthing went. He sold my mother's gold ornaments, then all our property. And when all sources of income had been exhausted, he proceeded to borrow money from Sharmaji - he was a distant relative of my father. In fact, he borrowed so much that even if he spent the rest of his life trying to repay Sharmaji he wouldn't be able to......"

Sumitaji broke off in the middle of what she was saying, and so I asked:

"So in order to repay the debts, you married the old man?"

"Oh, no! Is that possible? Can anyone do that?" she said. "I would too never have done such a thing anyway. But you see, I felt Sri Krishna and Sharmaji to be one and the same. It was my Lord's wish. And I happily agreed to what he had alloted to me. And whatever Sri Krishna has asked me to do, I have done!"

She remained silent for a while. Then again she began to speak:

"What happened inside of me no one knows, and no one understands my puja to Lord Krishna. That is why I do not ask Sharmaji's workers to accompany me ... I always look for someone new - for a stranger. And when there is no one like that to accompany me, I come alone. As a result of that I have a wound on my leg."

She showed me her left leg, and I saw where a monkey had attacked her. The wound was still open.

Sumitaji fell silent. I too had nothing to say in reply. She returned to her apartment without breaking her silence.

The next day a new job was given to me.

Early that morning a group of people had arrived dressed in white shorts and Shirts, with white caps on their heads. They held flags in their hands and arrived marching in formation.

Sharmaji introduced me to them and said,

"Bengali, instead of working in the Dharmasala today, you should look after the needs of these people. There is to be a meeting held for them in the Dharmasala tomorrow."

Their leader, Mr. Haripada Pathak, Chairman of the Brindavan Municipality, and one of his friends, were in charge of that meeting and were looking after the feeding and lodging of all the members who would attend it.

These men came and requested me,

"Yes, Bengali, deliver us from our responsibilities! It is only for two days. Then, after this affair is over, you need not work in the Dharmasala any more, we shall find some good work for you."

"Good work?" I was encouraged to hear these words.

"Yes, don't you want some good work in Brindavan?"

"Do I not? If good work is not available, any sort of permanent job will do. This Dharmasala - work has no security - any day and at any moment it may be discontinued. Will you really give me some work?"

The Chairman and his friend assured me again:

"Most certainly. You must get a good and permanent job!"

Other members also seconded this:

"Yes, certainly you will get it. As soon as this meeting is over, you go to the house of our honoured Chairman here. You will surely get a job. Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes, I am very satisfied." I said.

"Then start your work..."

I agreed, and asked them:

"Please tell me what work I shall do?"

"A hard task will fall on you tomorrow: ten thousand men will come, you will have to do all sorts of things for them tomorrow. But today there is only one simple thing: you must go to the Seths' and Brajabasis' houses with a wheel-barrow and bring all sorts of cooking utensils: frying pans and sauce pans, big bowls, paddles, spoons, ladles and so on. And then bring firewood from the market. This is all —then you will be free."

"Is this your simple thing? It will take a whole day! And how am I to pull the loaded wheel-barrow all alone?"

"Ah-ha! Haven't we arranged all that? Go and see there—another man is waiting with the wheel-barrow in the road for you!"

I went and saw that it was true. They had no shortage of labourers. Another one had been engaged like me probably also out of the chhatra queue.

Together we started to drag the wheel-barrow from place to place, carrying pans, frying-pans, ladles, paddles and other cooking vessels and fuel, piled up on the barrow.

But my companion could not cope with the strain of such work. Once or twice he put his hand to the pulling; but then he started to abuse the organisers, saying:

"Shaa ! Hang your good work! Does this kind of work suit gentlemen like us? And why should we do it? We have only to get to the gate of a chhatra - we shall surely be given food. But still they try to entice us: 'If you do this work, you will be given good food' - Away with your good food!"

And he pushed the cart to the side of the road and ran off.

But I could not run away leaving the wheel-barrow. I had no craving for good dishes; but the prospect of a good job ahead kept me going. The Chairman had said that he would provide me with a good job - then my stay in Brindavan would be free from anxiety.

With this hope in my mind I went on working that day and the next without taking any rest from morning until late at night. Drawing water from the well for the cooking, carrying drinking water, supplying fuel, peeling vegetables, fueling the fires and so on, up to 2 am. I have no idea what the members of the Jana Sangha did or said in their meeting at the Dharmasala. In the end, when all ten thousand members had finished their meal and gone to their rest, I too put something in my mouth and went to sleep.

But I could not sleep at all. Just as I was about to drop off, some members came to me and said,

"Chairman Babu is not able to sleep because of pain in his legs, because he has been labouring hard all day supervising everything. His legs must be massaged with oil."

I did not want to be the emperor of the whole earth and its seas then! I only wanted a little rest, a little repose! My eyelids were heavy with fatigue ... I could not even open them fully to see properly. Nevertheless they forced me to get up. And always with the same excuse:

"Come on, young man! Chairman Babu will procure you a good job!"

What could I do? Necessity knows no law. I had no alternative but to serve him, massaging his legs for an hour.

The two days passed like this. Then ten thousand men left the Dharmasala as repidly as they had come.

After those two days were over, things returned to normal.

I resumed my previous work in the Dharmasala . Each day, the same routine was followed: At 3 to 4 am Sharmaji would waken me, calling, "Bengali, wake up! wake up! It is morning now."

I got up quickly and still rubbing my eyes opened the door, to see that there was still dense darkness everywhere: not a stir, not a sound of birds!

So I would plead, "Sharmaji, where is morning? It is still the dead of night!"

He said, "No, Bengali, no! I have already taken my tea. How can be your dead of night? Go, go, bring two betel-leaves with tobacco for me from the shop nearby."

"Where is any shop near here?" I still objected.

"There is, there is. Go up the road a little way, you will find it. There's a shop for betel leaves and bidis under a tree by the side of the road just in front of the Bharat Sevashram - you will see their light."

But who would dare to go out before dawn like that, relying only on a single banian and a shawl? Cold wind comes as if to swallow you up! Besides, I was barefoot: after only a step or two, my feet felt numb to the waist!

But as I went a little further, my troubles faded. There was not a soul in the streets of Brindavan. Some neon lights under the shade of a tree by the road-side spread a mysterious atmosphere in that last watch of the night. As I walked along the road, I suddenly felt that I was no longer alone - a presence was there beside me. It was as if Sri Radha had joined me, along with her close friends - Brinda, Lalitha, Bishakha and the rest. As I was looking out for the betel-leaf shop, she was looking for Sri Krishna. It was as if she were asking each tree and bush, questioning each path and bathing place, and every animal or bird she met, in the way whether any of them had seen her Lord Krishna - under which kadamba tree her life-mate was playing his flute?

"Oh, how sweetly and most sweetly
The flute is playing, where, under which kadamba tree,
Who can tell me?...."

I do not know, with what kind of ears I heard that song, but even now I can distinctly recall that melody and yearning - something inside me responds to it still.

As I heard it, I felt a strong urge to search the whole of

Brindavan until I found the source of its sweetness.

But I could not do it just then: no, Sharmaji was waiting for me. I had to hurry back with his betel-leaves.

Neverhtheless, this getting up in the early morning and going to purchase betel-leaves for Sharmaji became a source of great exhilaration to me. Each day I would discover new mysteries of Brindavan, and through that my life became sweet!

So my days in the Dharmasala would pass quite pleasantly. After buying the betel-leaves and taking a glass of tea sweetened with jaggery instead of sugar, I would assist the chhatra cook in his work of preparing food for distribution. Immediately after that I would go to the market with Sharmaji; and after returning from the market there would be some small household chores to be done for Sumitaji. After lunch, I would be free for a while and have leisure to bask in the sun. Then the time would be taken up with some small tasks until it was the hour to go to the temple with Sumitaji. At night there was no work: I had the evenings and nights to myself for rest or meditation or whatevr I chose.

So I hardly kept track of the passing days.

But unfortunately this happy life in the Mirzapur Dharmashala did not continue long. One day the previous employee returned from his leave for medical treatment after the monkey-bite; and as soon as he returned, my services were dispensed with. Sharmaji said,

"Bengali, you may go now. This man is my old employee, he has to be given priority - and there is not enough work to justify keeping you here any longer. Carry on as you were doing before. Check again here after ten or fifteen days ... I shall look out for another job for you."

I had known in my heart that such a thing was bound to happen one day. That was why I had been telling Sumitaji time and time again:

"Kindly ask Sharmaji to make the arrangement about my work permanent."

But in this matter she could not overcome her shyness. She always said to me, "Yes, I shall surely tell him." But actually she could not tell him even once. If she had asked him, Sharmaji could not have refused her request - but perhaps she felt some hesitation to present my case to him.

On the last day, when Sumitaji heard that I had been dismissed, she said,

"Why are you worrying about work? Go to Mr. Haripada Pathak, the Chairman ... didn't he tell you that he would get you a job?"

Then I remembered: yes, they had promised; I had forgotten all about it.

I went straight to the Chairman's residence. He was a well-known person in Brindavan... when I asked a man in the street, he pointed out the house. But I could not meet the Chariman. His wife told me,

"He is not at home. It's not sure when he will come." Even, after several attempts on three or four consecutive days, three or four times a day, I was still unable to contact him. Each time I heard the same reply:

"He is not at home."

Disappointed, I went one day to the house of the Chairman's friend. His name and address were known to me. After seeking him out, I met the gentleman in his farm-yard. From looking at his farm and cowshed, one could guess what a prosperous man he was. But he did not sit in his room with a tobacco pipe in his mouth! The labourers were at work; on one side a huge pile of wheat was being moved into the barn; on another, straw was being cut in a machine. He was supervising all that. When he saw me he gave me a warm reception:

"Come, O Bengali, come! What's the news?" he asked me.

I went straight to the point:

"I need a job, sir. Didn't you say that you would arrange a job for me?"

He immediately replied, "Yes, yes, certainly! Why not?"

"Then please give me a job now."

"Tell me, what kind of a job do you want?"

"I'll do whatever you need to be done," I replied. "Of course, there's a point: I have previous experience in Press work. I've seen a good number of printing presses here. I know written English and Bengali, and can soon brush up on my Hindi. Can you provide me with a job anywhere in a press?"

"You want to do work in the press!"

"Yes, sir."

But as soon as he heard this, the gentleman began to laugh loudly.

"What is it? Why are you laughing so much?" I asked.

Still laughing, he answered, "Bengali, brother - I'm laughing at your request."

"Why? What have I said that is so amusing?"

"Why, isn't it a joke?" he replied. "You will work for a while, and then one day you will disappear along with some of the valuable equipment!"

I was overwhelmed with shame and astonishment at this reply. I could not believe that he could dare to say this right in my face.

But the next moment, after a little reflection, I saw his point:

"It's true... I never thought of that side of it. I am a stranger here and a Press job would mean working with metal lead and type which are both quite valuable ... if I were to run off with these things, this man himself would be held responsible."

But is there any way to reply to such words? I could not think of a single word to say to him; there was no way for me to guarantee my honesty. So with my face hung down in shame, I left his place immediately.

Ten or fifteen days passed.

I was still sleeping in that same cave under Sharmaji's Dharmashala, yet I had no contact with the people there. I did not go to their chhatra, and I did not hear any news about it. I used to leave the cave early in the morning and return there at dead of night ... so I didn't notice any change there.

But one day I happened to glance at the Mirzapur Dharmashala as I was on my way to Lala Babu's shrine. There was a vast crowd of recluses and mendicants in front of the gate. Seeing them there, I thought:

"What if I go the Mirazapur Dharmashala chhatra today? Sharmaji told me to check back there after ten or fifteen days. I can meet him, and at least have a meal at the chhatra. Besides, the Mirzapur Dharmashala offers square meals to new guests. A regular guest as I was cannot have a square meal every day. But of course it is possible to become a new guest again, by going there after an interval of some days. Today I can be a new guest again at the Mirzapur Dharmashala."

As I approached the door, I found that the invitations to sadhus and beggars had just started. Sharmaji was not there. In his stead a new man was performing his work selecting and calling the sadhus and Vaishnavas one by one into the chhatra.

I asked one of the people in the line,

"Where is Sharmaji today? Why don't I see him?"

The person I had addressed did not reply. Another man at his side said,

"Oh, hadn't you heard? Sharmaji has gone away."

"Where has he gone?"

"Ah! He passed away!"

"What are you saying? Are you joking, Sir?" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Oh, no - it's true. He really did leave his body."

"When? When did it happen? What happened to him?"

"Two or three days ago he died of a heart attack. But they are calling, I must go inside now." And he left me. Left standing there by myself, I looked around me and thought,

"What kind of death is this? The man I saw working in full health just a few days ago is gone? But the work has not stopped, despite his death - nothing is disrupted: just as the call was given to sadhus and Vaishnavas before, the same is going on today.... only one man is absent, and another has come in his place."

And then I remembered Sharmaji's third wife:

"Ah! What will happen to her? She must be devastated! Sharmaji was not the owner of the Dharmashala - he was not even its manager ... he was merely looking after the kitchen, he was employed here. No sooner is he dead than he is replaced. So Sumitaji will not be allowed to live in the Dharmashala any longer. Where will she go with her little daughter then? I do not know whether Sharmaji had any relatives who could look after his family. Has he left her without any provision? If so, he certainly neglected his responsibility towards his family."

Besides, in what a calamity Sharmaji left her! A crowd of greedy people were all around her. How would she be able to protect herself from that atmosphere? Who could protect her now? I had seen with my own eyes how Deodhar and Munshi were waiting with open mouths whenever Sumitaji came out of her apartment - as if they would swallow her up. And I had also heard them speak filthy words that were not fit even for my ears! Perhaps Sharmaji had not noticed all that. What faith he had had in them! He had even told Munshi that he would appoint him the private tutor of his daughter and help him to continue his studies!

I had sometimes felt like saying to Sharmaji:

"Oh, Sharmaji: Flee from this Dharmashala with your wife and daughter... otherwise you cannot live, they will swallow you up! You will be wiped out by their hungry breath!"

Now I wondered whether really they had wiped him out. All of this was running through my mind as I entered the door of the chhatra. That day I was given permission to take a full meal at the chhatra; but on my way in, I stopped, remembering something.

I thoght, "If I happen to meet Sumitaji now, face to face, inside the Dharmashala, what shall I say to her, how can I face her? And once I am inside, it will be impossible to avoid her, for she lives just near the door. No, no need to eat here - better to go away!"

But as I turned to go, I saw Sumitaji in front of me. Holding her daughter by one hand, and a pot full of water in the other, she was just returning from her ablutions in the Yamuna.

I said to my eyes,

"How dare you fall just on her eyes?" and I shuddered, as if I had seen a ghost!

Like a man who has to swallow a bitter pill, I wanted to escape somehow and avoid her eyes... for how was I to console her in such a grief?

But what was this? I seemed to see a sweet radiant smile of recognition upon her face!

I stopped short. I was about to cast down my eyes, but could not ... they remained fixed on hers; and I saw that truly she was smiling at me graciously.

Of course, it was only for an instant. The next moment she cast down her eyes and said, still walking on,

"Hellow, Bengali! How do you do? Have you got a job?"

Wonderful! It was I who should have inquired about her welfare,... instead she was asking about my well-being!

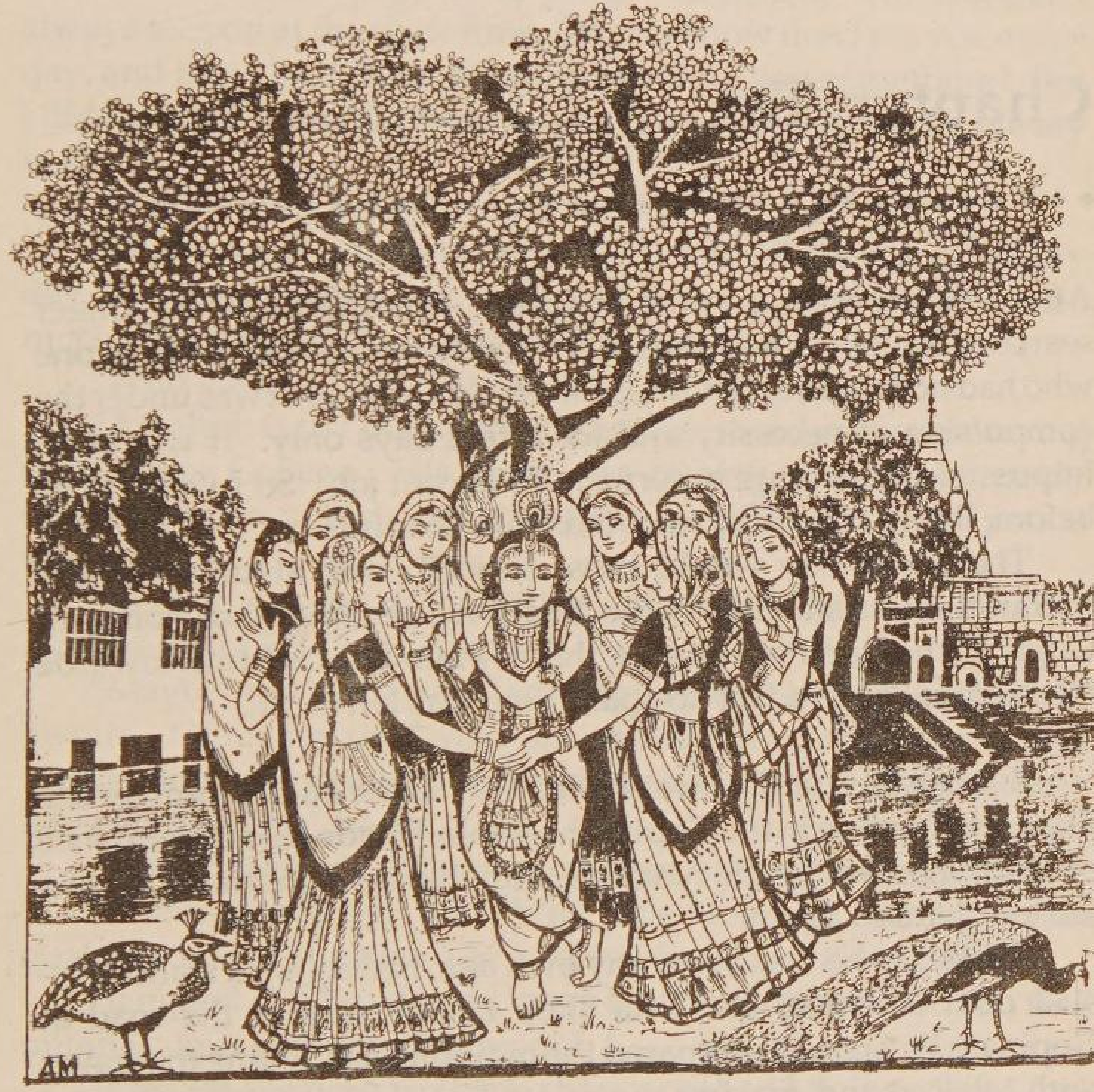
But she did not stay to hear my reply... was she deliberately hurrying away to her room to hide her shame and sorrow? Who knows? Anyway, swinging her pot in her hand, jerking her wet hair, she moved repidly away, leading her little daughter by the hand ....

I thought to myself:

"But what is this? I see not the slightest shadow of mourning for her husband's death! And why isn't she wearing a borderless cloth, the mark of widowhood? She is dressed just as before!"

But then I understood; I remembered:

"Oh, didn't I myself call Sumitaji Brajangana that day? And didn't she tell me that Sharmaji and Sri Krishna were one and the same to her? So why should I expect to see any signs of mourning on her? Or wish to see her dressed as a widow? The Brajanganas after all felt illicit love - extramarital love - for Sri Krishna! There is nothing to mourn for when the earthly husband departs. For Sri Krishna, the Lord of Brindavan, is always with his Brajanganas !"



Notes and Reference

1. Patol : Tricosanthes Dioica - a green vegetable.

2. 'Brajangana' means a woman of Vraja or Brindavan and refers especially t the lovers of Sri Krishna.

Chapter Ten

After this experience at the Mirzapur Dharmashala I no longer searched for jobs. I had seen that nobody would offer work to one who had no hearth and home; if work was offered, it was under the compulsion of necessity and for a few days only. It would be impossible to procure a permanent decent job. So I went on as before, living on what I recevied from chhatras.

The whole day would pass so well, with ablutions in the Yamuna and listening to the Bhagavat reading and 'songs of Gopis' at the Gopinath temple, that my mind did not turn towards job-seeking, and in fact no spare time was left for it.

But one day, while I was on my way to the auditorium for the Bhagavat reading in the Gopinath temple, I made the acquaintance of Madhu Sorkel by the roadside, and that brought thoughts of a job to my mind again.

Madhu, who was about my own age, had set up a stationery-stall cum betel-leaf and bidi shop by the side of the road at Gopinath Bazaar. He prepared the bidis himself, rolling the leaves with tobacco and making them into bundles; then he tempered them by holding them in a flame on a piece of wire netting, and sold them to his customers. The shop was running well; two other people had been taken on to help him prepare the bidis.

One day as I was passing his shop he dropped the roll of thread with which he was tying up the bidis that he was rolling, and it was about to fall into the gutter. I caught it quickly and handed it back to him. That was the beginning of our acquaintance.

Madhu asked me,

"Every day you pass my shop... where do you go? Please tell me."

"To the Gopinath temple," I replied.

"To hear the Bhagavat reading?" he asked, "No wonder I always see you at the same time. Do you know that I see you every day, and that I have been thinking of telling you something? But I did not do it. Now that you yourself have come to me, let me say it..."

"What do you want to say?"

"Of course, it's not very important; still, I'll say it now : Every day I've been wondering about you because you remind me so much of Amalesh. You look just like him !"

"Who's Amalesh?" I asked.

"Amalesh is my younger brother. He is studying engineering in Mathura College. His exams are coming soon, so he rarely comes home to visit us ... otherwise I would like the two of you to meet."

"Really? Among all the millions of people that exist, there are many who look alike." I replied.

"Maybe - but this particular resemblance is truly remarkable," he said. "Your features, your size and build - even the way you walk is similar. I would like to invite you to come to my home and meet my mother." he said.

"Why?" I asked. "Shall I go to your house for no reason?"

Madhu answered, "Ah! Why for no reason? Doesn't an acquaintance visit the house of a person he is acquainted with?"

I laughed. "What do you mean by acquaintance? Within five minutes you can know a person?"

"I realise the time has been short," replied Madhu, "but I feel as if I had known you for a very long time. I don't know why."

"Well," I answered, "it does sometimes happen that way - right from the first meeting there is a familiarity and closeness. But let me meet your family another time - not today ..."

From that day onwards, whenever I went to hear the Bhagavat reading, I would first stop at Madhu's shop for a few minutes. He would tell me stories of Brindavan and Mathura and speak about his homeland and his home. He too was from East Bengal. He told me that when he was very young he had come here with his parents and his brother from Jessore District in East Bengal. His father died some days after their arrival, and the family fell upon hard times. Madhu had to struggle with a lot of hardships and tribulation, and so he had been unable to continue his studies.

Madhu said, "I don't feel the slightest regret that I did not get the chance of a higher education. Today I am able to stand on my own two feet. Though I could not study myself, I am getting my brother educated in the engineering college in Mathura. After some time he will pass his exams and start a workshop. Then I shall have no anxiety. Of course, even now I have nothing to worry about! I am quite satisfied with my situation. I do not have to worry about food and clothing for my family, nor live in a rented house. I had some cash in hand, in addition to the income from this shop; I have purchased a plot of land and made a single-floor brick house in Madan Mohan's locality."

"Which Madan Mohan are you speaking of? Madan Mohan Brajabasi?" I wanted to know.

"Don't you see the sky-kissing temple of Madan Mohan?" he replied. "Look over there - my house is near that place."

I followed the direction of his gaze until my eyes fell on a huge temple that I had often passed but had never entered.

"Oh! You mean that is Madan Mohan's temple? I have seen it many times, only I did not know its name."

"You know," Madhu continued, "Madan Mohan is a living deity. Whatever a man prays for to him, it gets fuflilled. Devotees send money to the deity from far abroad. In fact, it is due to his grace that I have been able to rise up from distress!"

"Well," I asked. "if Madan Mohan is such an important deity, then why is his own condition such?"

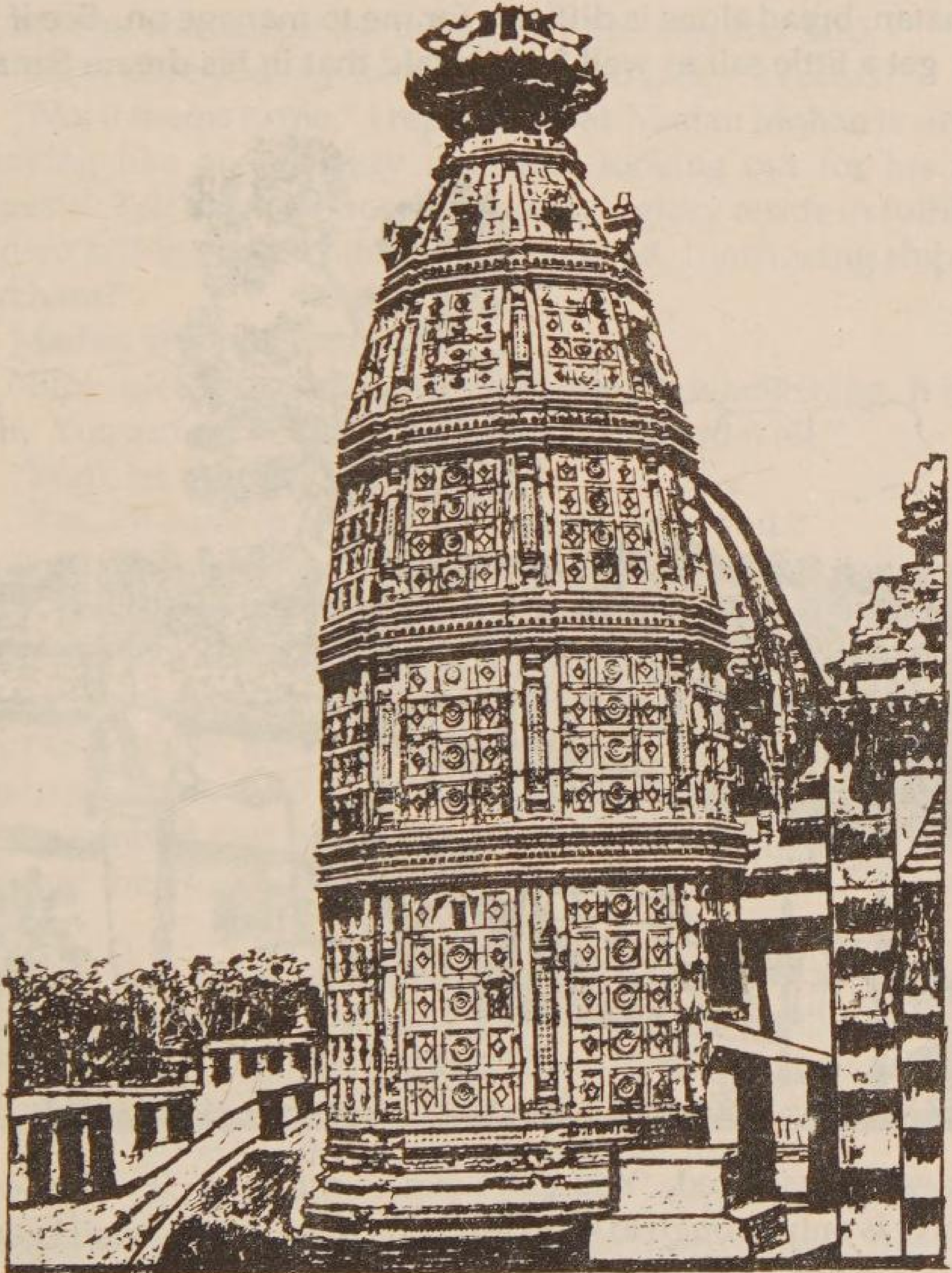
"What do you mean by 'such'? What condition?" Madhu was displeased.

"I mean, why is Madan Mohan's sky-kissing temple in such a deteriorated state? It is a grand building, why is it so run down? Can't he manage to repair it?"

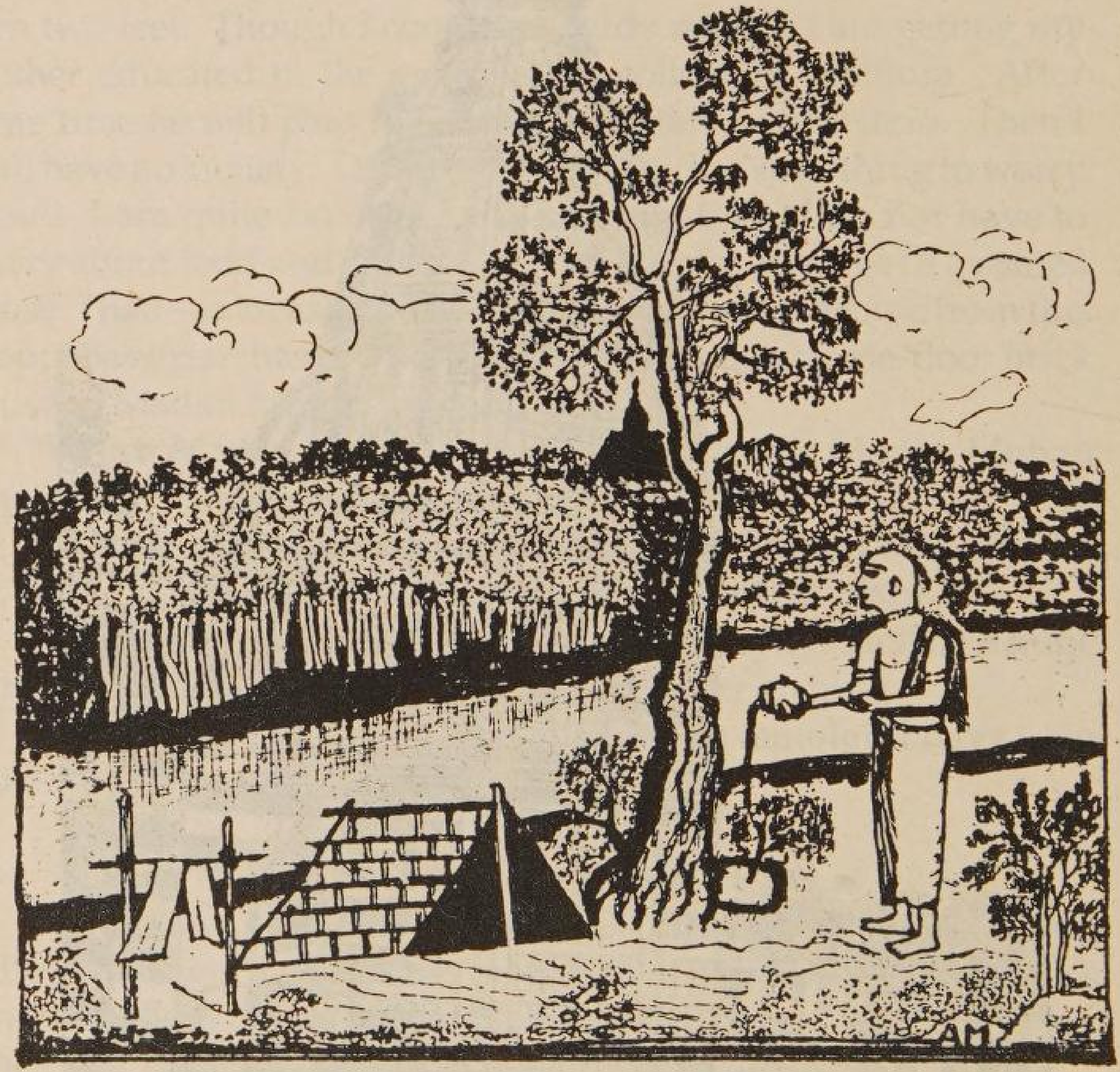
Madhu was taken aback by my criticism; but he could not help accepting my logic.

Madhu said;

"Yes, what you say is correct. But will the Lord of the temple repair his house with his own hands? He must get it done by someone. But where is such a devotee? If he found another devotee like Sanatan Goswami, then it could become another golden temple for Madan Mohan! When Sanatan Goswami first founded this image of Madan Mohan, even rice and bananas were



not being offered to the deity. Madan Mohan only lived with the Goswami in the same cottage of leaves on the bank of the yamuna, and would receive the dry bread the Goswami obtained by madhukari in chhatras. But in the long run, this became intolerable to Madan Mohan. So one day he told Sanatan Goswami in a dream, 'Sanatan, bread alone is difficult for me to manage on. See if you can get a little salt as well !' It is said that in his dream Sanatan



Goswami answered, 'You can't expect me to do it. The food I receive is only enough to keep this body alive; where shall I get salt to give to you? Whatever I get from madhukari I share with you. If you wish to eat salt, earn it yourself' ...

"And it is reported that after that Madan Mohan earned his requirements. He detained the merchant-ship of a rich merchant, and arranged to receive his meals from him every day; and even this sky-kissing temple was built by that same merchant."

After hearing all this, I said do Madhu :

" I'm not very impressed with this story. The glory of your deity may reside in any ohter matter of any other thing, brother– but in this event that you have just told me of, no glory has been revealed!"

Madhu was surprised to hear my answer, and said,

"How dare you say that? Is there no glory revealed?"

"No; it seems to me," I replied, "that Madan Mohan is simply behaving like an ordinary man just looking out for his own interests! Tell me, how does your deity's glory reside in fulfilling his own self-interest by detaining the good, functioning ship of a merchant?"

Madhu stopped me, saying,

"Stop, please stop! I haven't told you the whole thing. It is my fault. You would not say this if you had heard it all."

"Well, let me hear it all then."

"Yes, I'll have to re-explain everything to you."

So Madhu continued, "It seems that the merchant had cruised down the Yamuna with his merchant-ship full of goods, and Madan Mohan actually stopped his ship with occult force, to show the merchant who he really was; then he commanded the merchant to worship him, saying that only then would he allow the ship to move on. And if the merchant did as he commanded, the deity promised that his profits would increase enormously, and said that then he should construct a temple in honour of Madan Mohan.

"And so it happened. The merchant's profits became tremendous. He was very happy and gladly built the temple as he had been told to do. He also arranged to pay for all the pujas and other ceremonies. ...

"Now, tell me - what is so selfish about this?"

"Well, perhaps nothing," I replied. "But if Madan Mohan could arrange for the temple to be built in the first place, then why can't he arrange for another merchant to repair it?"

"As I said before, perhaps recently he has not been able to find such a devoted follower. Besides, we ourselves tried hard–by collecting subscriptions, by yearly contributions, taking pilgrimage-cess from pilgrims - and we have repaired the temple many times. But how much can we do, after all? And I accuse the government of the country. Will the deity protect his own temple himself? Shouldn't our government help to maintain such a fine temple? Then why is there a government?"

I seconded his words: "Indeed, it's true. Temples are the assets and glory of the country. Should they get spoiled in this way? Our past emperors and kings used to construct temples and mosques and monuments with funds from the royal treasury, and they made arrangements for their protection. They understood that these things are part of the wealth of our country. And now the independent Government of the state is so indifferent in this matter!"

Each time I chanced to meet Madhu, he would commence with some such story, speaking at the outset of temples, images, saints, recluses and happenings in Brindavan, and always ending by discussing the government of the country.

One day he asked me,

"Have you ever acted in a play?"

I said, "No. I never have. But what makes you ask?"

"Well, we're organising a drama. And we are short one actor... because one of our group is leaving town. If you can take his place, we would be very grateful. It's not a very big part. There's neither much dialogue nor action involved. If you would see it a few times, I'm sure you could fit right in."

"Well," I replied, "I don't know if I'll be able to do it or not, but I'll give it a try."

" I'm sure you can do it," he said. "When I spoke to our party about you they were very relieved. We don't have enough time left to hold auditions."

"You have already mentioned my name to them? What if I had said 'no'?" I asked.

"But you have said you would try!" he replied smiling. And pulling me by the hand, he added, "Come, let's go to the club now."

Though I did not take the time to explain this to Madhu, I felt very happy inside. This drama would put me in touch with so many people in Brindavan... and perhaps also give me the opportunity of finding a job!

That evening, Madhu took me to the club. It was on the second floor of a building located on the same lane as Madhu's shop in Gopinath Bazaar. Above the entrance hung a dilapidated old signboard which read, 'Sri Gauranga Dramatic Club'.

Hanging around the walls of this room were old costumes, swords and weapons and all kinds of dramatic paraphernalia.

The other actors had not yet come. The only person to be seen was the director, who was sitting on a stool smoking a cigarette as he read a book. Madhu introduced me to him :

"This is my friend, Vijaybabu... the one I spoke to you about."

Vijaybabu motioned to me, "Come, come over here and take a seat." He was very cordial to me. "Have you acted before, or is this your debut?" he asked.

I felt apprehensive of what he would say about me. Madhu understood, and spoke first,

"First see him act and then decide... otherwise why should I have brought him to you?"

The director smiled. "Of course I will." He handed me the book he had been reading and said, "Here, read this aloud."

Then he explained to me, "In front of you is another actor. You are replying to a question he has just put to you."

I began to read. After a few sentences he stopped me,

"All right, that's enough." He took the book and turned over a few more pages. "Now start here" he said. "This is a description of the action on the stage. Read this so that you will know what to do."

And he continued, "You are one of three fat Brahmins who are obsessed with eating. All three of you will enter from that side of the stage, chatting and laughing and carrying a variety of eatables. Your task is to make the audience laugh. It's not difficult, but it requires that you should not be self-conscious about it."

I didn't know how I would do it. But at the first rehearsal I found it all coming quite naturally to me. The director was very pleased. "Who would know that this is only your first play? Your work is as good as that of many of our group here!" he said.

A few days later, the play - called *Bhakta Haridas*, or *Haridas the Devotee* - was performed in Ashwini Babu's temple. In the large hall of the temple, throngs of people - men, women and children- gathered at one end near the makeshift stage and dressing-room. There were separate seating-arrangements for males and females, and there was also a special arrangement for a large green-room.

This was the first time I had ever been in a drama. I was still living in the same cave, depending solely on the benevolence of some 'retail chhatras' where only one chapatti and a little dal was distributed. For my lunch I would collect five or six chapattis from five or six chhatras, and at night I had to do without any food. But my role in the play was the character of a fat and gluttonous Brahmin. My empty stomach was heavily padded to portray the greedy man's ludicrous pot-belly, though inside I was starving. While I was playing the part of the gluttonous Brahmin, keeping pace with my fellow-actors, moving my hands and mouth and making the pot-belly dance, I suddenly felt light-headed and giddy... so much that I feared I would fall down into the audience!

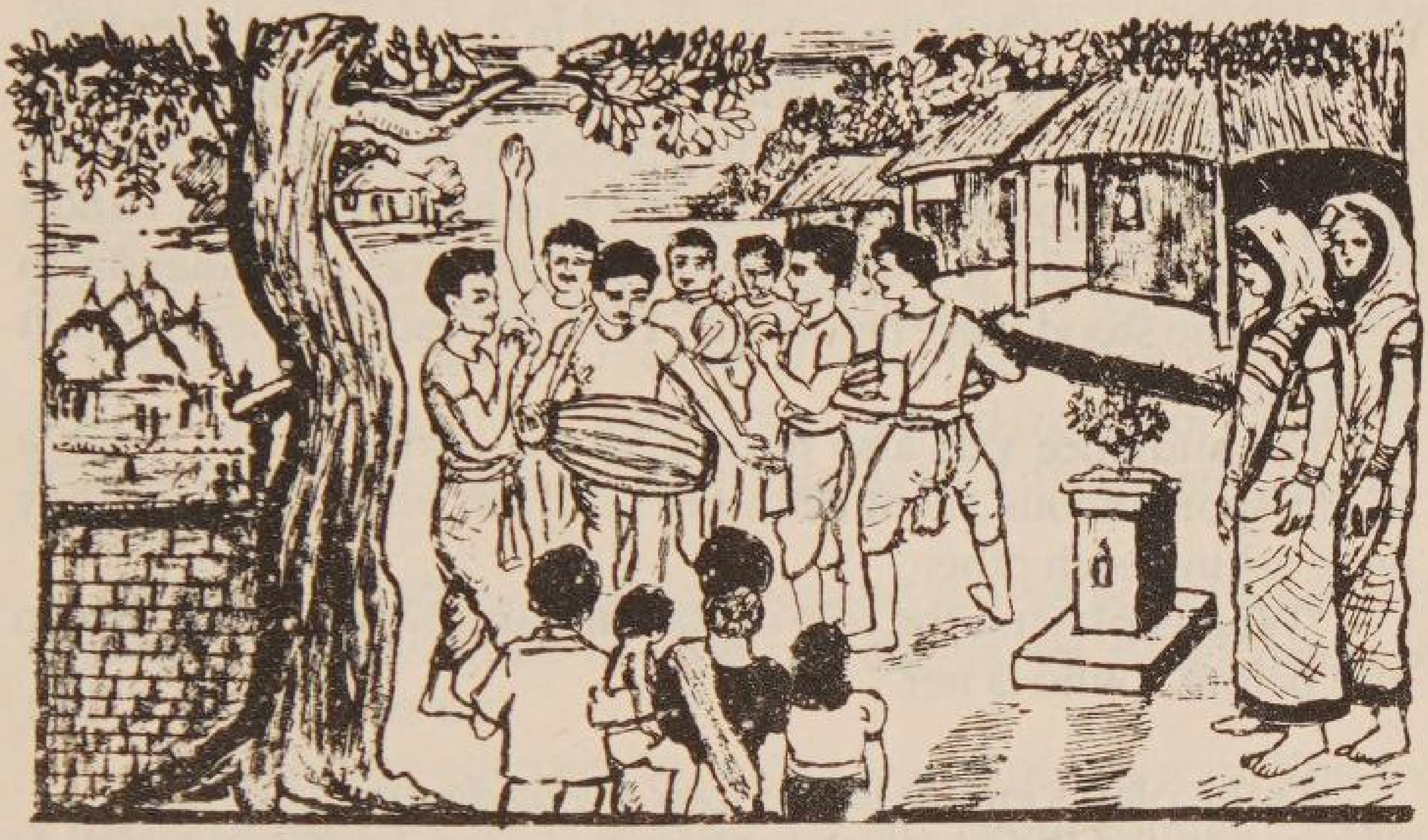
But it lasted only briefly; suddenly a new force flowed into me. The dizziness left me. For I told myself,

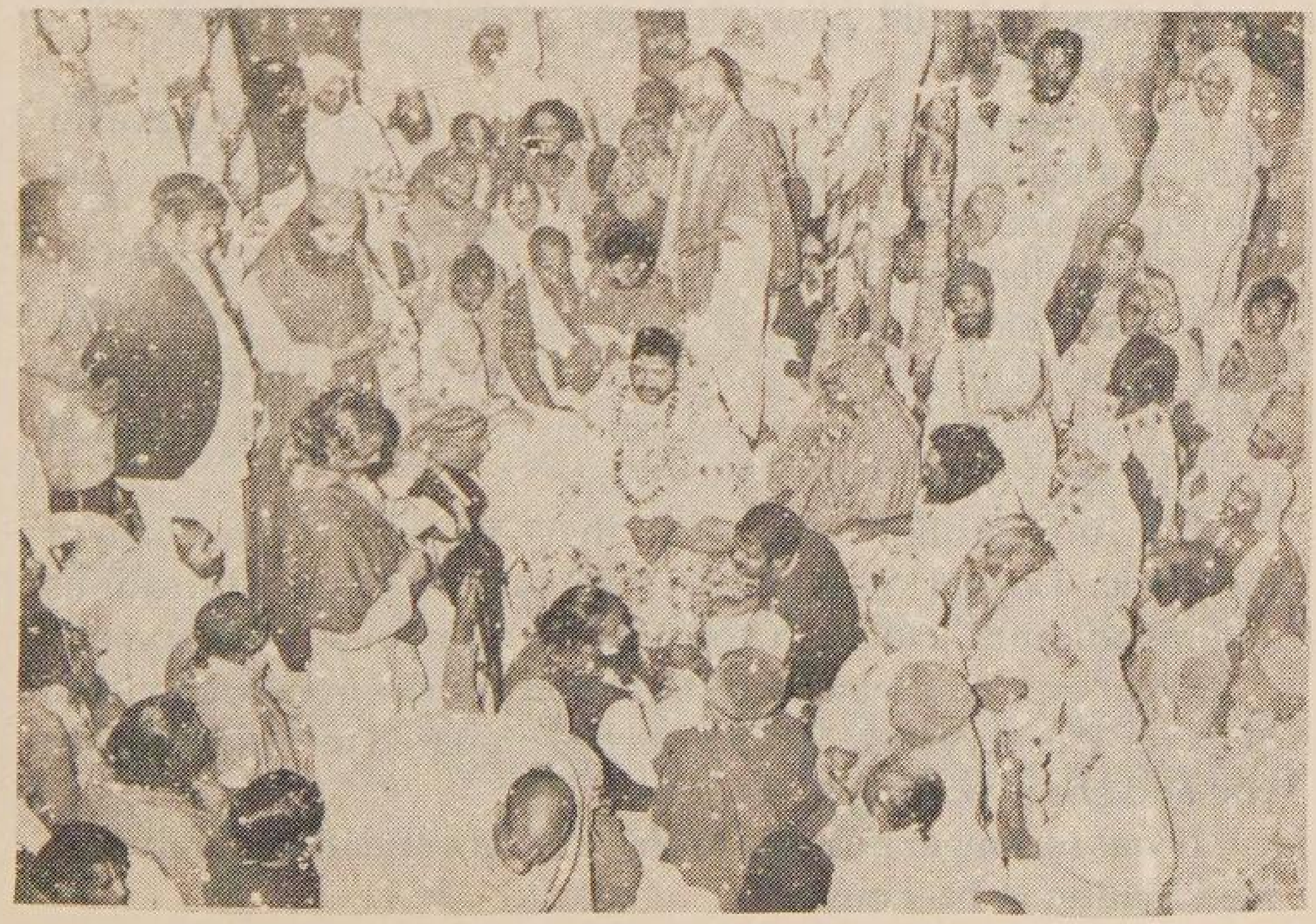
"Why will you lose consciousness? Out of shame? Where's the shame? Because thousands of eyes are looking at you? But, you know, none of them can recognise you! So why lose consciousness?"

The words were not exactly these, but I made my mind hear some such auto-suggestions at that moment. And it had an effect: the consciousness did not leave my bodyand my acting became excellent!

The director was pleased with my acting, and even while the play was still going on he asked me to substitute for another bit-actor who had not shown up. Changing clothes was not necessary for this, nor was there time for it.

In this saga about Sri Chaitanya, he and his faithful companion Nityananda were on their way to pay a surprise visit to the home of one of his devotees - Srinivas Pandit. The news had spread rapidly. Hearing it, the devotee Haridas and Adwaita Acharya went there. A band of *kirtan* singers also followed joyfully on behind them. Srinivas Pandit's younger brother, Ramai Pandit, was also an ardent devotee of Chaitanya Dev. It was the role of this younger brother that I was asked to play. When my guru arrived, I was to wash his feet and dry them, place fresh flowers





upon them and put a garland around his neck. Other devotees in the gathering would have to be treated in the same manner too.

As I started to play my role, something happened. I forgot where I was... whether in a Pandit's house, in Brindavan, or on the stage; I also forgot who I was... as if I had become Ramai Pandit himself, and truly it was Chhaitanya Dev and Nityananda in person who stood there before me. How to describe the way I felt or what I saw?

The audience was also moved by the performance. Such a fluent spontaneous silent acting filled them with wonder. They were asking each other,

"Who is playing the role of Ramai Pandit? We haven't seen him before... who is he?"

At the play's end, Madhu took me aside and said,

"You know, my friend, this is our amateur performance - not professional."

"What does it matter?" I replied. "It's over with and that's all that counts."

"Well, I mean, there is no celebration afterwards... as the professionals should have at the end of the play," he said .

"What is that?"

"The arrangement for the reception of the actors. We have no such arrangement. We offer our drama, and each of us eats in his own house and spends out of his own pocket."

"That's very good! I too can offer my role to the deity!"

Madhu said, "You may do that, but I can't let you go without food, so late at night! Tonight you will have to come to my house. I have been waiting for this opportunity for so many days - I shall not take any notice of your objections!"

"Oh, no, Madhu!" I argued, "that's no good. I am a man of the streets. Do you know where I live? I stay in a cave with sadhus and mendicants. How can you take such a man to your home?"

"Whoever you may be, tonight you are my honoured guest! Let's go. It is very late. My mother has prepared refreshments for you and she is waiting."

It was no longer possible to object to him after this. I accompanied Madhu to his home.

And indeed, his mother was waiting, with food prepared for both of us, already placed in dishes in order. I would have committed an offence if I had not gone there.

I had already heard from Madhu that they were well-to-do; but I had not imagined how affluent they were. When I saw his home, I realised that they were really solvent. His one-storey residence extended over several plots, and there was no shortage of bedsteads and other furniture. I had expected to receive two dry rotis... to my surprise I was served instead fresh, hot *luchis* (roti fried in ghee) and a special vegetable, as well as Bengali sweets... *rasagulla*!

Madhu's mother sat beside me and fed us both luchis and vegetable and rasagulla (a kind of ball-shaped sweet made of milk). She said to me,

"Why did you not come for such a long time, my son? You are a friend of Madhu. Why do you feel shy about coming? Come again whenever you wish."

Then she began to ask about my home and family, and said in an affectionate tone,

"Oh my son! Why should you live in such a condition in Brindavan? Why not go back to your home?"

I said, "To whom shall I return? My parents are no longer alive."

"Oh, that is why you are wandering here and there! Alas!" But she did not have time to impart any more good advice. It was already very late by the time the play ended, and now more time had been spent in eating and chatting; so I could escape from her affection quite easily. And perhaps because it was so very late no one else from the household appeared to see this friend of Madhu's who resembled Madhu's brother! I was saved from all sides.

But Madhu did not let me go after the meal was finished. He said,

"Where will you go at such an hour? Mother has prepared a bed for you - take rest on it a little!"

What a good day it had been! After a very long time, that night ended in Madhu's house with delicious dishes and a beautifully comfortable thick mattress on a real bed!

Anyway, the play had served its purpose - my object in acting in that drama was actually fulfilled : through it I got acquainted with many people of Brindavan. The very first time I entered the club room I was introduced to several people; then again when I was being made-up in the green-room, more and more eager eyes began to fall on me. Everyone had only one query : "Who is this unfamiliar man? Why don't we know him? How has he come into our dramatic party?"

I felt very much inclined to answer them like Saratchandra's character Kamal Lata:

"You know me, sirs; you do know me; you have been seeing me in the streets and bathing places of Brindavan since long. But you deliberately refuse to recognise me, lest you should have to give me a job!"

But now the circumstances had changed. Now I had an identity of my own: Madhu's friend!

Mr. Goswami, the servitor of the Damodar temple, was one of the patrons of the Dramatic Club. When I happened to meet him the next day in the street he recognised me and asked, "Was it you who acted the role of Ramai Pandit yesterday?"

"Yes, Sir." I replied.

"I wondered why I didn't recognise you. I was told that he was Madhu's friend, but I couldn't think who this friend of Madhu's is that I don't recognise!"

" I'm a fairly new friend of Madhu's". I answered.

"Oh, I see. Where do you stay?"

"I stay in a cave close by with some sadhus and beggars". I said.

He asked me again : "Why in a cave?"

Then I found myself telling him the whole story, and ended by telling him,

"You see, I don't just want to move from chhatra to chhatra - I need a job somewhere. I have enquired from many people, but nobody could give me a job. Can you help me?"

Mr. Goswami was very pleased to hear that I was looking for work. He said,

"You want to work? Ah, it is a very good sign! Nobody here wants to work nowadays. Who would want to work if food is so freely provided in chhatras? So you are different!"

"Yes, I truly need some work". I answered.

"Well, come with me to my house". he said.

Though he was a servitor of the Damodar temple, Mr. Goswami was not a priest who only earned rice and bananas by worshipping the deity. His very name indicated that he was a descendant of the revered Goswami family of Navadwip in Bengal. His huge mansion stood just beside the main road near to the Damodar temple. There was a large open compound. On one side of it was a garden, and on the other a cowshed, before one reached the front door. He himself always looked neat and clean and fashionable, wearing a suit and coat like a town gentleman, and with a costly cigarette holder always in his mouth. I remembered that on my way to one chhatra or another I had often seen him conversing with opulent Seths in their parlours. He seemed to have a close intimacy with the Seths.

Mr. Goswami called me into his house and gave me a seat. He too drew up a chair and sat down. Then he asked me,

"Let me hear what kind of a job you want."

I said, "I'll do whatever job you give me."

"Really? Any work whatsoever?" Mr. Goswami echoed me.

"Yes, sir."

"Fine!" he said. "Well, what's your educational background?"

When he asked me this question, I thought that he might not have any work for me himself, but that he might put me to work for one of his wealthy friends at some Seth's office - perhaps some kind of accounting job. With this in mind, I told him,

"Yes, Sir - I was studying in college... "

Mr. Goswami seemed startled to hear this.

"What? What did you say? You were studying in college?"

It was as if the flame of his enthusiasm had been abruptly extinguished.

"Sir, what is the matter? Why are you disappointed?" I inquired.

"You have some education at least... then what kind of work can I give you?" - and he sounded quite dejected!

Then I thought to myself, "Alas! What have I done? Why did

I have to tell him about my education?"

Aloud, I said to Mr. Goswami, "Had I known that, sir, I would never have mentioned my education to you. I would have said, 'I'm utterly illiterate!' But the fact is that I can't tell a lie. Those words would not come into my mouth. That is my problem!"

"But who would believe you, if you told a lie? I doubted when I first saw you. I thought -'This young man is not like those who beg from chhatra to chhatra.' That's why I asked about your education."

I still tried to make him understand and said,

"But Mr. Goswami, now I am no better than a street beggar. Few chhatras will give me food now; so in these circumstances, what is my education worth? I tell you, whatever job you give me, I will do it with great joy."

Mr. Coswami said, "Is that ever possible? Can an educated man do all sorts of jobs?"

"Well, just give me any job and see..."

"No. It's not possible. How can I give just any job to an educated man? Even if you would do the work, I could not make myself give it to you."

"That is your magnanimity, Mr. Goswami. But from my point of view, I can do all kinds of jobs . . . just try me!"

But Mr. Goswami went on in the same tune:

"No, that's not possible. It won't be possible to make you do all kinds of jobs."

After many entreaties he said at last,

"Well, I will try to find you a job. Come again another day and I will see what I can do for you."

With these words he left the room, and I too was about to go away when I noticed that Mr. Goswami's wife and two sons were approaching me. They had overheard our conversation from the portico of another room. As soon as Mr. Goswami stepped out of the room, his two young sons called me back:

"Wait a bit, sir."

It looked as if they were going out to play tennis. They had tennis rackets in their hands. They came up to me and observed me closely from head to foot, remarking,

"Bravo! Bravo! You must be very clever to have got so far in your studies!"

"Why do you find it so clever? You two are also studying in college, aren't you? You must have done the same as I have." I replied.

They did not answer, but only began to laugh. Then the elder of the two said,

"I accept what you say. But what service will Brindavan offer you that is worthy of a college student? Is there any office here where you could do office work?"

"Are there no office jobs? How's that? I have seen many businessmen who have book-keepers and clerks. I have heard the sound of typewriters in many offices. Besides there are large printing presses, shops and so on too... yet you say there are no office jobs?"

"But those are just domestic positions. There is no real office job to which you could be appointed. But don't lose heart... one job is available here that is just appropriate for you..."

"What is it?" I asked eagerly.

"Cymbals!"

"Cymbals? What do you mean?" I asked.

"Yes, can you play cymbals? Kirtan parties are always in need of a man to accompany them on cymbals - cymbals in each hand and 'Hare Krishna, Hare Ram' in the mouth!"

As they spoke, they mimed the playing of cymbals.

I could hardly keep from smiling at the sight of their pantomime.

"No, it's not a joke. It's quite true!" they said. "Will you be able to utter 'Hare Krishna, Hare Ram' and play on the cymbals? It is the only job available here in Brindavan!"

"Aha!" I said. "Who wants a job worthy of a college student? I'm prepared to do almost anything - even sweep the streets or tend cows in the fields."

"Really?" they exclaimed. "Can you tend cows?"

"Of course, why not? What shame is there in looking after cows in Brindavan? Haven't you read Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Janmantar* - Rebirth?"

"Rebirth? A poem by Rabindranath Tagore? Why? What is it about?"

"Do you want to hear what it says?"

And I at once made them listen to the poem, reciting :

"I'm ready to forsake the enlightenment of civilisation;
I don't want to be a new age-leader in new Bengal;
What loss is it if I don't go abroad for a foreign degree,
And what harm if I don't get the title of King?
If only I can become a cowherd boy of Brindavan in my
next birth
I will put out the lights of civilisation that burn in
my house."

They both asked me,

"What does it mean?"

"Couldn't you follow? Rabindranath cherished a desire to become a cowherd boy of Brindavan in his next birth. He was a world-famous poet; it was not possible for him to give up name, fame, influence and honours, and become a cowherd in this present life... so he expressed his grief and yearning by saying-' If only I can become a cowherd boy of Brindavan in the next birth!' But I don't have the restrictions that Rabindranath had. I can become a cowherd boy of Brindavan in this present life - here and even now! Give me your cattle and calves... I shall go and return with them after tending them in the pastures!"

Hearing this, they were beside themselves with laughter.

The elder brother said,

"Hurrah! His sense of humour is also keen! He says, he wants the privilege of being a cowherd in Brindavan!"

"Yes, indeed!" his younger brother supported him : "and he has read Rabindranath too... so now he wants to herd cows here!"

And again the two brothers burst out laughing.

"Why shouldn't I have read him? I come from the homeland of Rabindranath Tagore and Vidyasagar. I have been reading their books since I was a boy."

"All right," they said, still laughing. "You have done well to read them. But we have only two cattle - one cow and her calf - in our house. We didn't know that you would come to tend them; so we have already employed a man to look after the two cows we have. If we now hire you for that work, then that poor fellow who has already been appointed will be out of a job!"

"So, are you saying that you have no job for me?" I enquired for the last time.

The elder brother pondered for a moment and then said,

"Well, let us go there once. Let me take you to our priest. He has been looking for some help."

The lofty shrine of Damodar was just next to their house. They ushered me into the coutryard of the shrine. We met the priest on the verandah of the room next to the temple. Seeing me, the priest asked them,

"O elder brother! Who is this new face?"

Then the elder brother introduced me to him, saying,

"This new face was wanting any kind of a job, and we brought him for you. You've been looking for someone for a long time - why not appoint him?"

This Brahmin had asthmatic trouble. Even this brief conversation was difficult for him. He sat down on the verandah of the temple.

"Yes," he said then, "I am certainly searching for a helper. My work is too much for this body. Even taking two or three baths every day is an effort. I've mentioned this to your father so many times, but if no one is available, then what can he do?"

Then he turned to me and asked,

"Can you take over the responsibility for the service of the idol, brother?"

What could I say? I was speechless. This service should be performed only by brahmins, and they had not asked me about my caste. Yet they said, "Can you take over the charge of the idol-service?" Can anybody do this service then?

I had to tell them,

"But I'm not a Brahmin - how can I do idol-service?"

I noticed an immediate change in the priest's attitude. He seemed rather startled, and became alert; before he had been speaking rather casually, but now he chacked himself and asked,

"Then what caste are you, brother?"

I thought they might not understand accurately if they just heard my surname, so I explained clearly :

"I'm not a Brahmin. But I'm of the same caste as Ghosh, Bose, Roy, Mandal, Choudhury in Bengal."

It was as if, on hearing my answer, the priest found a safe shore in a shoreless sea. He had been listening with bated breath. Now he breathed out and said enthusiastically,

"That will do! That will do, brother! You really saved me!"

But even when I got this reply, I could not believe my ears; so I repeated,

"Will that do?"

"Yes, yes," he insisted. "It will do. Do you think we don't recognise a man? Just seeing your face I understood that you cannot belong to a low caste - I mean, you come from the right type of family. You can surely do this work."

Then he took a deep breath and went on :

"As long as I'm alive, you need not worry about anything. I'll transform you into my own caste, initiate you and train you in everything, hand in hand. After all, I'm not going to be able to take leave until I have made you perfect."

A widow with her little daughter was standing listening to our conversation, just beside the priest. Now he pointed towards her and said,

"And here is Ponchi's mother. She will help you every day in every respect. She will do the sweeping and cleaning of the temple and see to your needs. You won't have to worry about anything, brother.

Surely here was an end to all my worries and anxieties. All of my cares were now being taken care of... a feeling of joy and relief came over me. How fortunate I was that now all my time could be spent in the service of Sri Krishna! From the time I set out from my village the great aspiration in my heart had been to reside in Brindavan forever and worship Sri Krishna, and bathe in the Yamuna every day....

"Is that really the Yamuna? Is the water of the Yamuna so deep here?" I asked them now, looking towards the vast waters which stretched beyond the temple compound.

"Yes, yes, it is the Yamuna," they said. "The bathing place is just there. You can bathe in it everyday, if you live here. So, are you ready?"

They seemed to detect that I was overjoyed to see the Yamuna so near. If I lived anywhere else in Brindavan I would not have the Yamuna so close! All my inclinations would be fulfilled if I lived there. So who but I would not be ready? I was on the point of saying 'Yes'.

But someone from within my heart said, 'No'!

When I heard this 'No!' I stopped. I argued with my inner voice,

"Why not stay here? Will you find a better place than this in Brindavan? You have undergone so much wandering and so many difficulties... please don't say 'No' this time!"

But the more I tried to convince that inner voice, the more my heart and mind failed me. I remembered the experience in the Bharat Sevashram. If I would worshipp Sri Krishna in the Damodar temple, wouldn't some similar difficulty occur? And besides I recalled another recent incident that had happened in the Sri Krishna Ashram only a few days before :

Among the audience at the Bhagavat reading I had made acquaintance of a Vaisnava monk. As I had asked Goswami, so too I had asked him, "Can you arrange some job for me somewhere, please?"

He was much troubled to hear of my search for a job. He asked me,

"What work will you find in Brindavan? If you want to sing the name of God where I sing, you will be provided for. Come at once if you agree."

I immediately consented and went with him to the stage of the Sri Krishna Ashram where the name of God was being celebrated without intermission. Upon the Ashram gate there was a brick-built cemented platform on four pillars, under the open sky, resembling a room for an orchestra. The name was continuously repeated twenty-four hours a day - I mean, without any break for a single moment.

There was an arrangement of devotee-musicians who sang in turn - as one band went away, another came in. When we arrived there, I found eight or ten Vaishnavas singing the names accompanied by drum and cymbals. For example:

"Hare Krishna, Hare Ram,
Nitai Gour, Radhe Shyam."

While singing the names, the band of musicians heard of my intention from by Vaishnava acquaintance. As soon as I sat on one side of the stage, after making obeisance to them, they gave me a pair of cymbals and said,

"There's nothing to teach: sing with us and follow us as we play."

But what an 'Irony of Fate'! All my faculties failed me! But is this work, which I thought to be very easy and with nothing to learn about it, so very hard? In our village, a lot of male and female Vaishnavas would come to beg, playing on cymbals; I would often take the cymbals from their hands and try to play them. In those days I used to think,

"If I only knew the song, I could sing and play like them."

How could I know then that it was so difficult? It was impossible for me to play the heavy cymbals and sing 'Hare Krishna, Hare Ram' in time with the beat of the other singers! If my mouth sang, my hands stopped; or if my hands and mouth managed to cooperate with each other, they could not keep time with the rest of the singers!

Even when this was somehow mastered, after tremendous endeavour and practice over several days, another difficulty appeared from another direction : I could not find the energy to utter the names aloud. I did not feel any difficulty in moving my hands, but my whole body became weak when I tried to move my mouth at the same time.

I informed my Vaishnava acquaintance of my trouble, saying "What will happen to me? I'm not getting any energy!"

He kept on encouraging me,

"Do it, continue it. Afterwards you will see, you will get accustomed to it... practice makes perfect. Then you won't have those troubles and inconveniences at all. Such things happen to everyone in the beginning. Didn't it happen to us all? Afterwards, everything became normal."

After one or two days I said to him again,

"Please tell me, what will happen if I don't get the energy to move my hands and my mouth at the same time?"

Without getting in the least annoyed he continued to advise me,

"Convince your mind that there can be no better work than this. It is both a *sadhana* - a practice of yoga - and a means of earning too. If you go on with this you will have rupees, rice, vegetables etc. and a room to live in! No longer will you have to do madhukari from chhatra to chhatra and no longer will you have to worry about how to live in Brindavan. Don't you feel strong, just thinking of it?"

But in fact, I could not acquire the least strength, even after repeatedly thinking of my future prospects in Brindavan. The more I tried to convince myself, the more my mind and vital strength failed. My Gurudeva made me understand clearly that day, that these things were not my spiritual path. My nature consisted in meditation through thoughtless work. So should I let my Master fall into a new ordeal today, by going to take up Krishna-puja in the Damodar temple? For it was obvious that before starting to perform the puja, I would have to be initiated into the Vaishnava cult. This was why the priest had said to me,

"I'll transform you into my caste and initiate you."

If I had continued going to the Sri Krishna Ashram a few days longer, they too would have told me the same thing. A non-Vaishnava has no right to remain with a Vaishnava.

Considering all this, I said to the priest,

"No, reverend Sir, this is a very difficult task. This will not be possible for me."

The priest was astonished and demanded,

"Why, what's the difficulty? Why can't it be done?"

"Isn't it difficult? Is there any other work more difficult than this divine service? It's a regular work for twelve months and thirty days permanently forever. I would be unable to go anywhere any more, even for a day!" I replied.

The priest still tried to explain and convince me:

"Why not? You can find a substitute every once in a while and take leave for some days. We all do that. Don't worry about that!"

But at this Mr. Goswami's two sons stopped him. They said,

"Silence, please, O priest! Don't insist on it, Sir. Do not worry we'll find someone else for this job."

Then they looked at me and the elder one said,

"Have you understood now why my father did not want to give you a job? Can educated men sincerely spend their lives doing service to the idol in a single place?"

"Yes, it's ture," I told them. "Mr. Goswami was wise to see that this work was not meant for me. I'm sorry for all the trouble I have caused you with my search for work."

And so saying, I left Mr. Goswami's house. I came out with great courage and pleasure. For at least I had been able to get rid of temptation and had abided by my inner voice. But that courage and pleasure did not last long as I walked away. I felt very exhausted. I felt very tired of fighting against hindrances and obstacles.

Weary and discouraged about finding any suitable job and decent abode, I wondered whether I would ever be able to reconcile my ideals with the real world. At that moment I only wanted to get away from everything and be by myself. So I headed away from the residential area towards the Yamuna river.

Actually it was well understood throughout Brindavan that when troubles were everywhere, the one place to go was to the banks of that sacred river. It was only there that the atmosphere of Radha and Krishna's *lila* - their sacred sporting, with its hidden spiritual significance - could still come alive again.

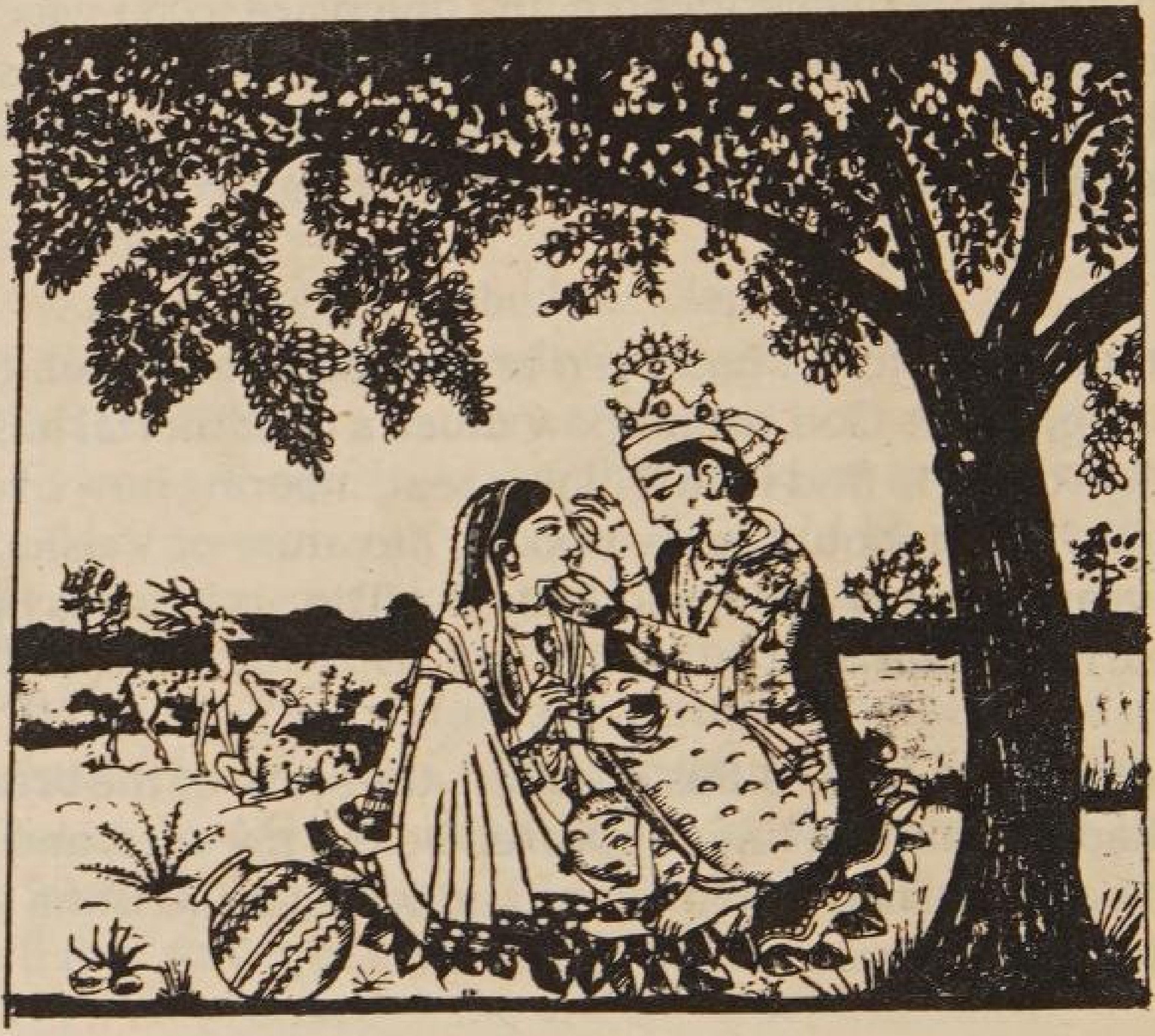
A moment before I had been immersed in my troubles and wondering, "Does God realise how much a poor mortal has to go through in order to find Him?". I was remembering how over and over again throughout the vast poetic literature of Vaishnavism Radha yearns for her Lord; and I asked - "Did Sri Krishna himself ever yearn for Radha?"

The moment I asked this question, the scene of the breaking out of Radha's hurt feelings appeared before my eyes, and a famous poem flashed into my mind, in which Sri Krishna said to Radha when she was angry with him,

" O Radha!
Raise your face and look,
Oh, raise your face and look!
The puppet of my heart dances with the dancing
of your eyes.
I wear this yellow robe, only to gain your love.
My heart throbs if you sigh heavily!
Oh Rai! How much longer will you test me?
The whole world know how much I adore you!"

Oh, Radha! Only once look at me with your face turned upwards, and see how my heart dances with the dance of your eyes.

You are fair in complexion, so I wear yellow robes to remind myself of you always. When I hear you sigh heavily, I am seized with fear at your suffering. Oh, Radha! How much longer will you test me? The whole world knows that I adore you. Forget your hurt feelings. Oh, Love! Come to me - I'm waiting for you with adornments and fresh flowers!



Chapter Eleven

I remembered that the day I left the Bharat Sevashram I vowed to myself that I would never enter any other ashram or monastery. And now, after the experience in Mr. Goswami's house, I made up my mind that I would not search for any kind of job here: I would leave Brindavan and head straight for Pondicherry.

It had finally begun to sink into my consciousness that if I could not become a monk or Vaishnavite myself, I would never find satisfaction in that atmosphere. When I knew that this was not at all what I wanted, I ought not to stay in Brindavan.

So now the will within me to go to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry grew increasingly strong. despite the warning I had heard that I would not be alowed to stay there, for a neighbour in my village had told me that the Mother would not be accepting new ashram members for the time being. If I had to leave Pondicherry, at least I would do so after hearing with my own ears whether the Mother gave me permission to stay in the Ashram or not.

But just at that time, I was offered a job which would provide me with a very small income - ten paise per day. The job was independent of any ashram or monastery, and I would not be obliged to live or eat in any such place. This would allow me to save up the train-fare for the long journey. It would delay me a bit, but that did not metter. Just then I had no money for the trip. I calculated that in six months I would have earned the train-fare, and I thought,

"After all, the conditions are not so bad here ... what is the hurry?"

So, on getting that job I felt as happy as a man who thinks about the amount he will obtain in future by depositing his small capital as a fixed deposit with a bank for twenty or twenty-five years, without ever considering the length of the period! I too began to imagine myself setting out one day, after depositing the ten paise every day and saving up the train-fare from Brindavan to Pondicherry.

I thought,

"What does it matter if it takes me six months or a year? Aren't my days in Brindavan passing in joy? Let some more days pass like this."

But it is sure that I did not undertake the thing of my own accord; the way that the offer of the job came, just at the time when I had decided to leave Brindavan ... I felt it was an indication.

It happened like this:

An ochre-robed ascetic with matted hair seized hold of me in such a way that I could not avoid him. I was passing from one chhatra to another on the way to Banke Behariji's shrine, through a throng of sadhus and Vaishnavas, when he suddenly caught hold of my hand, exclaiming:

"Here, I have got you! I have chosen correctly! You are just the man I've been searching for all this time."

I forgot to show reverence to the ascetic. I was so surprised that I just stared him in the face, and then said,

"Why, O reverend hermit?"

"My son, you will have to do a job for me. I won't take 'No' for an answer!"

I still could not respond; I just went on staring at him, wondering what was in his mind. Then he said,

"Don't be afraid. I won't engage you without pay. I'll pay you in cash. You will get ten paise each day. It's a very small task. I know you can do it and it will only take ten minutes of your time each day, but the man is dying for want of this small help."

"Who's dying? Why is he dying? How can he survive because of me? - I put a hundred questions to the ascetic.

"No. I shan't tell you anything beforehand. Come with me and see the work for yourself first. But this much I can tell you - it is a type of work that you can easily do." This was his reply.

Out of both curiosity and appprehension I asked:

"Where is your shelter?"

"Oh, I'm not taking you to my place, but to someone else's house. He is the one who is in danger. It's just behind Banke Behariji's temple."

I had to go with him. He led me through the street behind the temple; a few doors further on, we came to a two-storey building. Once inside, we climbed the stairs and entered a room where a fair-complexioned man, vast in length and breadth, was lying on a white bed with a very ornate bedstead.

As soon as the hermit led me in, the man tried to sit up, but seemed unable to succceed; he fell back, and from his lying position said,

"Come in, Sir, come in!"

As he spoke, a good sober-looking lady, perhaps the mistress of the house, hurried through another door at the back of the room to welcome him also, saying,

"Please come, Sir, come - please be seated."

She advanced a chair with a tapestry seat for the hermit. When he sat down, she went out again, probably to arrange for some service and refreshment for him.

The hermit went on speaking to the man on the bed. The conversation was in Hindi ... he had spoken to me in Hindi too. First the ascetic enquired about the welfare of all the inmates of the house; then he described to the man on the bed how he had found me for their work. Then, turning to me, he became practical:

"Just see the condition of this gentleman! Such a huge person is practically paralyzed by rheumatism. You will have to cure him."

It fell on me like a bolt from the blue.

"How can I cure him? Am I a medical man?"

"I know you're not a medical man. But you will do what you can. All that is required is to massage this gentleman with oil each day. Won't you be able to do that much?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. Now I understood. What the hermit needed was simply a healthy young man to massage his patient thoroughly, and he was happy about having found me as better than others from that standpoint. But though I now understood that this was all they required, I still did not quite know what to say.

The hermit went on:

"Do you see why I did not tell you about the work beforehand? Most people would not like to do this kind of work even for pay; if anybody is willing to do it, he lacks the strength. But you have both qualifications: you need money and you are strong as well."

"I do understand now how you chose me; but why do you feel that I am willing?" I asked the ascetic.

"I felt it when I saw you. Tell me, do you need money or not?"

I wondered, "Is this hermit a knower of the heart? How could he know that I need money for the trip to Pondicherry?"

But I did not say anything.

Of course, I did not need to say anything. The ascetic got up, went over to the cupboard, took out a phial of oil and proceeded to demonstrate for my benefit how to massage the whole body of the patient.

Then I asked, "At what time would I be required for the massage?"

"Whenever it suits you, as long as the sun is up - that is the one requirement. Only you must do the work perfectly so that the gentleman will recover," he replied. "You know what your own Bengali saint Vivekananda has said: 'He serves God who serves mankind.' And if you serve a man in Brindavan, you will see - Radharani will surely bless you!"

After he had shown me the full procedure for the work, the ascetic went away to his own place.

From that day onwards, I did that work every day at noon. In the course of my work I learned from the hermit that although the invalid gentleman lived in Brindavan he was not a Brajabasi, a native of Brindavan. He was big property-owner from Agra. In Mathura there were a bank and a school named after him. His sons and daughters and other relatives lived in Agra and in Mathura, and only he and his wife lived in Agra and in Mathura, and only he and his wife lived in a rented house in Brindavan ... and this was because his guru was none other than the ascetic who had brought me there.

Anyway, my patient was an interesting man. Although he was born into wealth, one would never have been able to tell that from his behaviour. I never saw the least luxury or extravagance of unnecessary expenditure in his way of life. He was very simple both in dress and speech, and quite candid like a child. Hearing him speak with me in a mixture of Bengali and Hindi, who would have guessed his real background?

That very first day he said to me,

"Do you know, Bengali, that I can also speak some Bengali?"

"Really?" I replied to his Bengali words with a little amusement. "Ican also speak a little Hindi - so we should have no difficulty in communicating."

He too felt amused at my reply and said,

"Surely, it will be very convenient! But first tell me, how long will you stay in Brindavan? Why have you come here?"

It was a fair question! As I said before, from my appearance it would have been impossible to say whether I was an ascetic or a Vaishnava or a beggar. It would even have been hard to take me for a pilgrim. This was why he wanted to know why I had come to Brindavan and how long I would stay. The ascetic had not asked me anything about this when he appointed me - so his patient had to ask me how long I would work.

I had to answer him frankly. I said, "You see, Sir, I came here by mistake. As soon as I can, I shall go to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherryy."

It had not occurred to me that saying this might affect my job here ... I expressed myself freely to the landlord simply out of delight at the prospect of leaving for Pondicherry.

He was really surprised when he heard of my plans, and asked,

What? You will go away?"

"Yes, Sir," I said, and told him briefly my reason for going.

"Then, why did the hermit bring you here? When will you go?" he asked.

"As soon as I have enough money to buy the train ticket," I replied. "Perhaps it will take five or six months for me to collect the fare."

"Then you will stay here five or six months?" The landlord was visibly relieved. "That will do. We will be able to find replacement for you by then."

I confirmed what he said: "Yes, sir - if you are willing to pay, you will definitely find many candidates. For those who have money, where is the lack of workers?"

Then I changed the subject and asked him,

"Sir, have you ever heard of Sri Aurobindo?"

"You mean Aurobindo Ghosh?"

"yes, sir, Sri Aurobindo of Pondicherry."

"Oh, yes. I heard of him long ago, and I remember reading his book 'The Life Divine'."

"Really?" You have read "The Life Divine!"

"Yes, of course. Do you know what a famous person Aurobindo Ghosh is?" I have most of his writings in my cup board."

"I see. I have also read many of his writings; but even though he is my Guru, and also from my own state of Bengal, I haven't yet read 'The Life Divine'. Isn't that strange?" I asked him.

But the zamindar didnot attach much importance to my wonder. He went on:

"You know, Bengali, in those days I was a staunch follower of Aurobindo Ghosh's and Tilak's ideal, and just as they were involved indealistically in politics, I was too. I used to practice a lot with lathi and spear: I was quite strong in those days ... I used to do so many physical exercises and wrestling too ... "

"Oh, you did wrestling too?"

As I spoke, I glanced at his body and mentally noted:

"Yes, his appearance is just like that of a first-class wrestler!" But the muscles of his body had now become flabby and corpulent.

He answered,

"Didn't I? Do you think I was always an invalid like this?"

"No,sir," I replied sympathetically, "how did it come about?"

"It is the trend of age, Bengali, the trend of age! It happened suddenly!" And he heaved a long sigh.

At once I sensed how he must have been so active politically and so healthy. A little earlier I had been thinking from his appearance that he knew nothing, did nothing, read nothing - that he had been lying ill with rheumatism in bed like this forever! If anyone who knew him from those days were to see him now, would they believe that he was the same person who used to be in politics with Sri Aurobindo and Tilak then, who wielded staff and spear and was a wrestler?

It was very important for me to hear these words from him. It was even more important to learn about his revolutionary days and his knowledge of Sri Aurobindo, because this gave me a happy feeling inside and I felt much closer to him. We had something in common, which I would never have guessed from his appearance and behaviour. I started thinking:

"Ah! Then he too is like my Guru, my very near and dear one! I'll be holy through seeing and touching him too, and I will have my Guru's grace!"

It was good that I felt like that; because when one is required to get as physically close as that job demanded, an exchange of energies automatically takes place. Up till then, I had been feeling uncomfortable with myself, about earning a rich man's money for that sort of work. It was not the most pleasant of jobs: it required a lot of physical exertion on my part, and the bad smell of the oil with which I massaged him would linger with me the whole day - I could not get it off my hands, try as I would. In fact, in the first few days I came close to leaving the job.

But when I learned of his earlier revolutionary activities and his interest in Sri Aurobindo, my attitude entirely changed. My physical tiredness and desire to leave the job simply Vanished.

As a matter of fact, in those days, whenever I met someone who mentioned Sri Aurobindo's name, my attitude would change. I would immediately feel joyful at the chance of discussing or even just remembering my master. There was no one I felt closer to than Him.

I remember another similar incident in Brindavan. I entered a place called 'Prabhupad Kutir' - some Vaishnava monastery - because of my fascination with its name. It was just a small residence. In the verandah there, lay a much-respected Vaishnava sadhu; he too was paralyzed, like the landlord. I folded my hands and made obeisance to him, and then sat beside him. He asked,

"Who are you, papa?"

I didn't know how to introduce myself - what could I say? After speaking of this and that, as soon as I mentioned to him that Sri Aurobindo was my guru, he at once folded his hands out of regard for Sri Aurobindo, touched them to his forehead and exclaimed:

"Sri Aurobindo! He is not only your Guru - he is the Guru of the whole modern age!"

What an effect those words had on me: They rang in my ears for the rest of the day and I felt as though I were walking on a cloud. In fact, whenever I heard Sri Aurobindo's name in Brindavan, it would have just that effect on me!

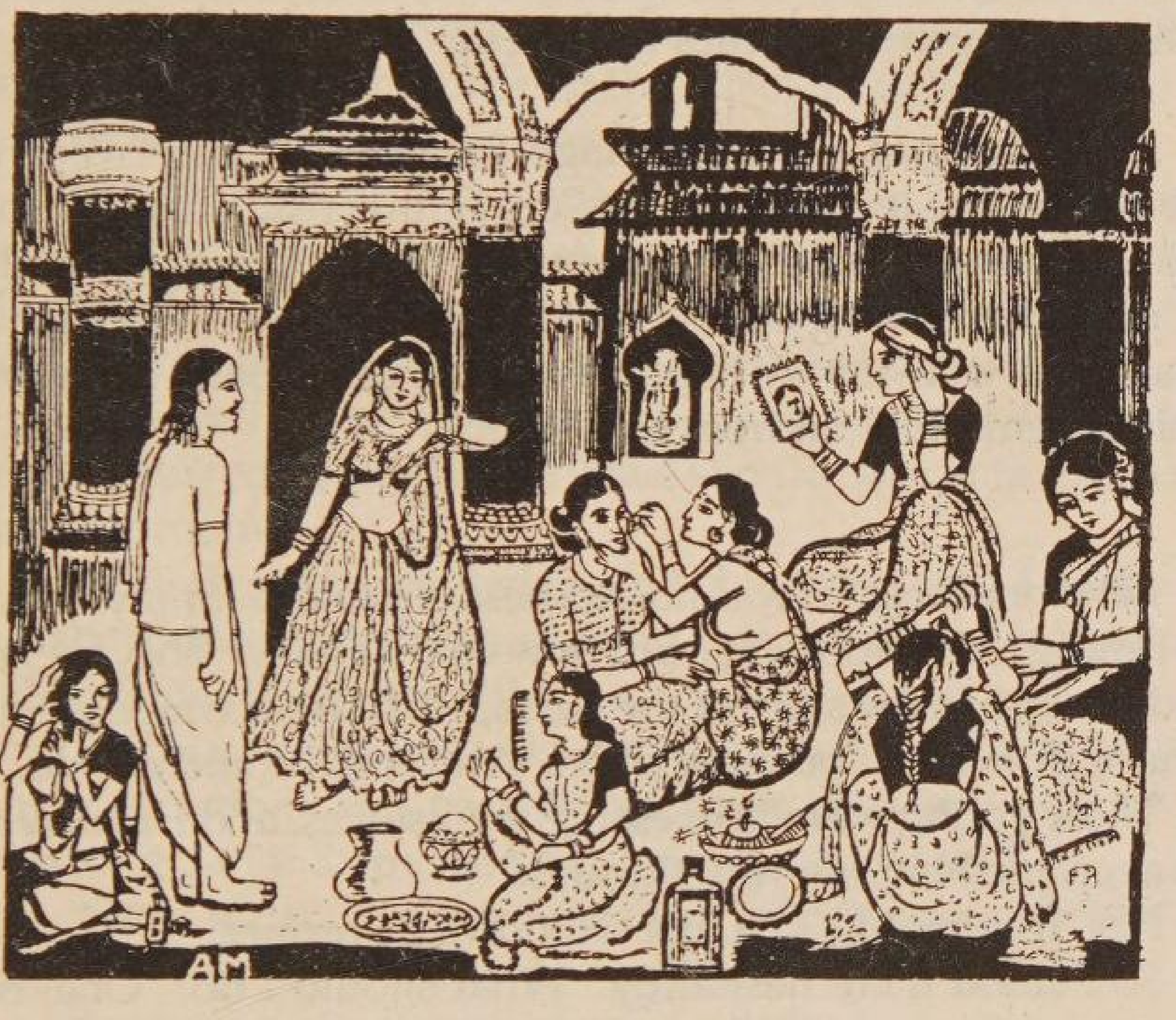
But let us go back to what I was saying earlier:

Yes, I well remember how I felt that first day as I came away from the landlord after giving him a massage:

I got seriously obstructed on the way.

As I said before, the landlord was living in a rented flat in a Brajabasi's house. To get to his flat, one had to first pass through the Brajabasi's flat. That first day, I had entered with the hermit. Then the passage was free ... we encountered not the least obstruction; but when I came away,the passage was entirely closed.

Of course, I do not mean that the door was shut with lock and key. No! Both parts of the door stood wide open. But still I could not go through. For blocking the passage and occupying the whole area arond the door, seven or eight beautiful young women had created a beauty-fair. They were married, unmarried, mothers of one child ... all kinds; but all were gifted with youth and beauty– in fact, all were exceedingly lovely; Their costumes too were in keeping with their looks. Some were in blue, some in red, some in violet, some in yellow, some wore the typical printed cloth of Brindavan. But none of them sat idle - all were busy. Some had flowers in their hands, some were busy stringing garlands of fresh frangrant jasmine. One who sat in the midst of the gathering seemed to be the central jewel ... and younger than all the others. Two or three young women were adorning her: one drew leaflike designs on her fair cheeks with sandalwood-paste; another was



drawing a line of collyrium in the corners of her eyes; one was painting a vermilion drop at the confluence of her curving eyebrows; some were braiding her hair with flower garlands. And she who was being dressed was only looking at the reflection of her face in the mirror in her hand, or looking around at the progress of it all; every once in a while she would burst out into sparkling laughter, or occasionally she would make a suppressed laugh full of loy at what she saw in the mirror ... and at that, one of the other girls would pat or pinch her cheeks a little.

What I saw was what Rabindranath Tagore has so aptly described in his poem *Konay Sajano,* which means 'Adorning a Bride':

"To adorn the bride in a robe crimson red,
To play the *shanai* in *behag*[1] by the door ahead...

The whole affair here reminded me exactly of the scene just before a marriage takes place. And I would have guessed this too to be a marriage party, except that one element was missing: there was no shanai - which is required for the procession which takes place when a new bride leaves her parents' home for her new husband's abode; and there were no tears, no sense of the sadness which normally accompanies this event.

So it was not for a marriage ceremony - they were not adorning a bride. It was as if they were getting ready to participate in some festivity or function, or were going out to a party; so they were rapidly adorning each other. Those who were decking the central jewel, were in turn being decked by others; and some were dressing themselves, in front of a mirror.

Let them dress! It was no business of mine. I simply wanted to go through that doorway. But how could I pass? They were all seated so close to the steps of the passage that it was impossible to get through without pushing them. And that I could not do.

These young women dressing themselves, and I, a man and a stranger, pushing my way through?

No! Impossible: ... It just wouldn't be proper.

So I stood there hesitantly. What should I do? One, two, three, four minutes passed, and I still stood there - none of them moved a little to allow me to go out. It seemed that none of them had noticed my presence.

So I was forced to try to attract their attention, and request them:

"Gentle ladies! Kindly make a little room for me to go through!"

But they turned a deaf ear to my words; they just went on dressing as before. I thought my voice lacked force and volume. So I tried to speak a little louder:

"Please, Gentle ladies, let me pass through."

That my voice gained volume and reached their ears, I could see from the way they glanced at each other and smiled slightly, before again attending to their respective occupations even more industriously - without moveing one inch.

Then I began to suspect that they were ignoring me on purpose.

I began to feel embarrassed by tieir manners and behaviour. I realised that the thing had been well planned: they had blocked the passage by sitting there, so that I could not go out!

I was in a fix. I wondered what to do! Should I return to the landlord's flat and complain to the mistress, saying,"Please come and see who is obstructing my way!"

But my heart did not respond to this idea. I was a young man then. The vanity of youth was greater at that age. I thought that if I was defeated by some young women and took assistance from another woman, they would surely laugh at me.

But even so, when I thought of the landlord's wife, it suddenly occurred to me, "What if she should see me in this position from her room?"

With this thought, I glanced behind me - and found at once that she too had seen this scene and was watching from a distance and enjoying it very much!

As I glanced backwards, the young women's eyes too turned in that direction. In a trice the situation changed: one who was preparing garlands pushed her neighbour and said,

"Hey girls! Let the wretched fellow pass ... Move just a little!"

So saying, she herself moved a little.

As a small gap between them opened up, I quickly sidled through. I had achieved freedom from my imprisonment!

But as I found out in the days ahead, my troubles with these women were not over.

But before I continue to narrate those events, however, a brief introduction to the male and female Brajabasis and their worship of Radha and Krishna will be helpful to the reader.

These Brajabasis were no ordinary ones. They were servitors of the most living god of Brindavan - Banke Behariji. Practically all the images worshipped in Brindavan are of Radha and Krishna in one form or another; it is only the names that are different: Madan Mohan, Gopi-Ballav, Gopi-Krishna, Radha-Raman, Damodar, Govindaji, Behariji, and so on .. they are known by innumerable names. But as far as I know, no other image of Radha-Krishna has so much prestige at present as Banke Bahariji. And very few deities in Brindavan are such nawabs as Banke Behariji.

As his income is abundant, so too his expenditure befits a nawab. A separate special market has been made for offerings for his enjoyment. Without sweets prepared from clarified cows' butter, Banke Behariji's palate is not satisfied; his mind is not pleased without flowers, tulsi and garlands from that particular market.

In no other shrine in Brindavan is there such a tremendous crowd for viewing the image of God as in Banke Behariji's shrine. And because of this flourishing market, and the large numbers of devotees purchasing puja-items there around the temple, it is very difficult to pass through that area at any time of day or night. Even if you manage it somehow, it may be impossible to view the image. The priests in the temple are very strict about allowing the devotees to view their deity for only a very few seconds. A priest standing beside the inner chamber draws a curtain every munute to shroud the image. The devotees are packed around the curtain just waiting for a glimpse of their god, but they are by no means satisfied with that short glimpse!

Anyway, these Brajabasis were the servitors of this famous Banke-Behariji of Brindavan. And like Banke Bahariji himself, his servitor Brajabasis were now in a flourishing condition.

They were a large joint family, comprising five or six brothers and all their offspring. All the brothers performed various duties connected with the puja of the deity. Some worshipped and read the scriptures, some bathed the idol, some dressed it and decorated it; some prepared the offerings, some drew the curain to give the waiting devotees their short glimpse of the god.

And what a godlike beauty they all hadı All the members of this family were so handsome that one felt that they had somehow descended from some heavenly abode themselves. Indeed they were fairer and more finely-featured even than those Kashmiri Brahmins who are renowned for their exquiste beauty.

When they returned home after finishing their worship, with red chandan (sandalwood-paste) smeared across their foreheads, wearing their special bright-red silken robes with a blue wrapper around the upper body and a striking red turban on their heads, they made a remarkable sight, and my eyes would feel satisfied to see them. It seemed to me then that the eyes God bestowed on me became fruitful by seeing their beauty!

And not only the priests ... their wives, sons and daughters at home were all exquisitely beautiful and young. I did not find a single old man or old woman in their family. The maid-servants and cooks who worked in their house were all nearly the same age, and handsome housewives. When I saw them all together in the house I felt as if I were in an exhibition of beauty. They were all so beautiful that my eyes did not know where to look!

A renowned English writer has expressed his view that the characteristic mark of beauty is that, 'It is a most disturbing element." That means that beauty is a thing that does not allow one's mind and vital to remain calm and quiet, but always attracts and disturbs them.

But the beauty of these Brajabasis and their wives which I am describing was not of this kind. Their beauty was such that it did not disturb my mind and vital in the least.

Or, as our famous Indian poet Kalidas has remarked:

"Ramyāni bikṣya madhurānśca niśamya sabdān
poryutsukī bahavati yad sukhitopi jantuḥ."

"Whoever sees things of beauty and hears sweet sounds, no matter how happy and content he may be, he must long to be more like that beauty himself." In both cases there is a feeling of discontent ... as if some sort of feeling of lack or deficiency must arise even in the mind of a happy man who actually wants for nothing; the happy man who is disturbed by beauty feels as if he had not got something, some great discontentment is concealed somewhere, which he cannot find out.

But I repeat, the effect of these women's beauty on me was something entirely different. Their beauty did not awaken in me any feeling of want or any sort of discontentment. On the contrary, a great happiness would arise within me. Their beauty was a great festival of delight for me and they were a feast for my eyes to behold.

And this was the reason that I could unite all their beauties ... husband's, wife's, son's, daughter's, maid-servant's, cook's ... into one single object of beauty, and could look on it with great delight. Beholding their beauty I would truly feel:

"Something I have got: Something I have become!"

I mean that within me came the feeling that I also had become beautiful, that I was one with them all.

But even these feelings were also superficial compared to somethings that happened later. So let me proceed further.

The next day, I met the same problem again: the women of that fair family were again blocking my way. Again they were performing the same general activities as the day before.

"Well," I thought, "do these women really have no other household work to do ? Is this a daily routine for them?"

Although this time there was not the dressing of the bride with sandal and cinnabar as on the previous day, all the other activities were the same: someone was making a wreath of flowers, someone was supplying her the flowers by breaking off the stalks, some were decking others with flower-garlands, some were applying make-up before a looking-glass ... but each and every one's undivided and uninterrupted attention was on what they were doing. They had not the least leisure to see or think whose way was being obstructed, who was standing beside them. They were completely oblivious to my presence!

Or was this just pretence? If they did see me, they were quite unashamed to have me stand there watching them and waiting for them to move. Or, was it really their intention to give me an opportunity of enjoying their beauty? Who would tell me, then?

It seemed as if they could understand my inner feeling: that their beauty was a great festival of delight for my eyes ... As if they wanted to say:

"Is seeing our beauty a great festival of delight for your eyes? It is all right. Then why are you fidgeting to escape? Stand here and look for a while!"

But alas! I could not avail myself of that opportunity. That festival of delight which I spoke of, I felt on getting a momentary glimpse of their beauty impersonally and from a distance. It was not possible now that I was standing very close to them. Now, seeking out a passage was the main task of my eyes, and enjoying the beauty surrounding me as I passed through was secondary. But now it seemed that they wanted to force the secondary thing to become the principle one!

How could that be?

Besides, in this sight there was no prohibition, no cover. In such broad daylight, in an open place, they wanted to show me their beauty, in front of one and all. And under these circumstances, their beauty faded into the background. Perhaps for this reason, seeing their beauty became more difficult for me.

I only saw my own difficulty, and thought:

"I don't need this festival of delight for my eyes. The sooner I am released, the better for my safety!"

There was another reason too: when the young women had not theleastshame, it was permissible for me to enjoy their beauty, standing gazing unashamed; but what if any of the Brajabasis noticed it from behind, as the landlord's wife had done yesterday? I was ashamed even to think of it!

And something similar did happen indeed. Fortunately no Brajabasi noticed, nor chanced to come; but two outsiders suddenly came to the door and found me standing nonplussed there!

Two coolies, with sacks of coal on their heads, came to the door, calling, "Elder mother."

Whatever they may have thought about me, they actually helped me. Because of them, my way was cleared. The Brajanganas were as startled as when a tiger jumps into a herd of cows. They ran away inside and freed the passage for the coal-bearers.

In an instant I was away ... saved!

But does anyone like to stumble over the same obstacle and inconvenience day after day? Can anyone bear it? My mind became really agitated when, on the third day, I again saw them all sitting there obstructing the passage. I thought to myself:

"If this thing continues, I simply will not be able to go on working here. Will a miracle happen for me every day? For without a miracle, I shall not be able to pass. On the first day I was freed by the sudden appearance of the landlord's wife. On the second day I got through because of the coal-bearers. But today, how shall I get through?"

I couldn't wait for good fortune to open a path for me day after day. That was all there was to it. I had no patience left.

After standing there for a moment, I spoke to them in a sharp voice:

"Ladies, this is the third day in a row! Why do I have to wait for you to clear the passage?"

My words had an effect. No sooner were they uttered, than all the women stood up.

I thought they were ashamd of their treatment of me. That was why they stood up to give me passage as soon as I spoke.

But what was happening? As soon as I started to pass through, they began to encircle me as in a ring!

Then there was lot of giggling and nudging each other, and then, what an outburst of laughter! Every possible kind of laughter started all at once: If one stopped, another started; one who had stopped, began again with redoubled amusement, sparked off by another's giggling.

Hearing all this commotion, a man of the family came out of his room to see what was going on.

I heaved a sigh of relief. Good God! Now at last I would be able to get to some understanding about this - at least with the man I would be able to talk in a reasonable manner!

But, O God! He gave one smiling glance, and went back inside again. Evidently he saw nothing to concern himself about.

If he had been a man of our country, would he have allowed such behaviour from the womenfolk towards a stranger? He would surely have shown some indignation and said,

"Eh? What's all this? Aren't you ashamed of laughing and romping around in front of a stranger, you all being grown-up women?"

But here the men of the house were to be admired: It seemed they were accustomed to this kind of behaviour. Then I felt even more uneasy and nervous.

After the Brajabasi had come and gone, the laughter of the Brajanganas seemed to be aggravated even more; from the way they moved and laughed and gestured, it seemed as if they had never seen such a nincompoop as me in all their lives!

Of course, from one point of view, I couldn't blame them. Perhaps I became a dunce at the sight of their child-like behaviour.

Now I very much want to express my feelings of that time on beholding their beauty. But can one always express everything just as one intends to? Sanjib Chandra, the author of Palamou, once remarked while describing beauty: "I have never seen beauty through the eyes of a poet, but rather I always look at beauty with the freshness of a young child; and that's why I can express my feelings shamelessly - express myself openly ...."

I, on the other hand, did not have that kind of liberty that Sanjib Chandra enjoyed. I could neither see beauty with a poet's eyes, nor like a young child, quite shamelessly. For since I had eyes to behold beauty, I had been hearing the chastising warnings of our ancient scriptures which strictly warn those who are practicing celibacy to beware of all women, and never to look at their faces, to regard every woman as one's mother, and to keep one's eyes completely away from them ... if by chance or mistake one's glance should fall upon a woman, then it should immediately be directed to her feet; this would have the effect of quelling all feelings of desire and hankerings for beauty, etc ...

In accord with that injunction, I directed my gaze to the feet of those Brajanganas. But alas! I could not control my eyes! What a danger! Those eyes of mine simply would not obey me! Instead, finding the opportunity, and thinking that no one was observing them, while my eyes remained on their feet, my thoughts turned to the beautiful bodies now unseen to them. They vigorously searched the Vaishnava scriptures to find the appropriate words for those feet, and said:

"So much beauty in one part of the body
Eyes cannot possibly contain them!"

Then they borrowed a simile from an ancient poet and said:

"Who says, the autumn moon is comparable
To the beauty of these faces?
Even a hundred such moons would
Hardly compare with the tip of her toe-nailsı"

Then they turned to a modern poet's fancy and said:
"Oh, my beauty!
One half you are woman, and the other half fancy!"

Now this much I can describe and the readers may still well believe me. But how can I ever convince them of what happened next? But having come so far, it is hard to check my pen! So let me tell what occurred next:

When they saw my discouraged countenance and downcast looks, there was another outburst of laughter from the Brajanganas - oh! what a laughter! And they ended up by pushing one of their group towards me until she finally fell against me: laughing and staggering, she tried to send my downcast look upwards, by knocking me with her elbow.

But I kept my face averted, and had no thought of looking up and facing them directly.

When at last they realised that they would not succeed like that in raising my eyes, one of them took the initiative; she held my chin up with her hand towards her face and said in a teasing voice:

"Come, come, young fellow - look at me just once! Why are you so bashful?"

And then again they all burst out laughing merrily.

I came to my senses suddenly at the touch of their bodies but how is it? There is no electricity in this touch? Do they really feel no shyness like me? Or have they been able to maintain this indifference by ingnoring me?

I was compelled to disregard the scriptural injunction solely in order to find this out. I turned the lamp of my eyes towards the moon-like faces of the Brajaganas.

But alas! I could not penetrate to the heart of their beauty. Even having them so close and observing them so minutely, I could not behold their beauty. I could not say like the poet:

"I have seen her minutely
But I know not any simile;
In the land of slumber,
She is a dream holy!"

I was lost. I was lost while beholding their beauty. I myself was metamorphosed into the body of a Brajangana.

At that time, a perception of yogic union of soul was becoming strongly active in my consciousness. For many days sky, air, trees, groves, animals, birds, men, women and children ... everything had been assuming a heavenly beauty in my eyes; and whatever thing of beauty I saw, I at once turned into that thing, without keeping anything for myself !

In the same way, that day I too became the Brajanganas ... I possessed the physical splendour of a face like burning gold with graceful eyes, nose and ears, like the Brajanganas; I had their youth-swollen high breasts; even the luxurious curves of their eyebrows was not lacking; even my attire became like that of the Brajanganas - and I said to myself:

"Oh, How exceedingly beautyful I am!"

But I could not stay long in that world of oneness in soul-consciousness. Why? Because they did not allow me to continue. One of the Brajanganas caught hold of my hand, shook it and said in Hindi,

"Well, young man, why don't you speak? Are you a blockhead, or dumb?"

I came back to ordinary reality and replied,

"No, I am not."

"Then why don't you speak?"

"Only just now I said, 'I'm waiting for you to let me pass!"

"That is all! Is this your speaking?"

"What else is there to say? I asked.

"Oh, is that all you can manage? There is so much you could say to us. Such as, where you are from, where you live, why you are here, who you are with ... somethging about your family ...

there are so many things to talk about! ..."

"But why should I just start on these subjucts on my own? If you were to ask me, it would be a different matter. And tell me, what kind of a person just starts advertising him self to a stranger?" I replied smilingly.

As soon as I said this, a second Brajangana came over and started asking me just such questions.

"Oh young man, are you a Bengalee?" she asked.

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied.

"Where do you come from?" she asked again.

"Since I am a Bengalee, I come from Bengal. Have you heard of calcutta?"

"Yes, of course, we have surely heard of the Bengalis' Calcutta!"

"You are right - that's the place ... I am from that Calcutta." I replied.

"What is Calcutta like?" she asked.

"How can I say whatCalcutta is like? Calcutta is just like Calcutta."

They did not like my reply. One of them demanded,

"Does it look like Brindavan? Are there such temples, and Radha-Krishna, like here in Brindavan?"

Another said,

"Why do you remain standing? How can we chat while you just stand there? Sit down here, please."

"But half the day is gone, and I have not yet bathed nor taken my food, so how can you expect me to sit and chat just now?" I answered.

"Oh, of course," they all responded in unison. "We must not keep you now. Go on your way, and we'll chat tomorrow.

I did not miss my chance - I left right away.

At last, they let me pass by them on those steps!

Perhaps it was not to the Brajanganas' liking that I should pass everyday before them with downcast eyes like a stranger; so they introduced themselves to me. It was their stratagem to get an introduction, to sit like that blocking my passage. Because, after that last incident, I found that this treatment changed completely. I no longer had any trouble passing through that doorway.

Of course, I did not have to give any explanation for my delay to anyone. I only had to go once a day to the landlord. But because of that delay, my whole schedule was affected. I became late for bathing in the Yamuna. I used to eat after taking my bath - so my meal too became late.

So the next day, when I found the passage free, I was about to escape quickly. But the landlord's lady was waiting - she wanted me to perform an extra task. She quickly came and caught me, saying,

"Bengali, will you do something extra today?"

"Please tell me what it is," I responded eagerly.

"My maid-servant has not turned up today," she said. "Can you bring me a pot of drinking water from the well downstairs?" "Why not? Why do you hesitate to mention such a small task? Give me your water-pot."

I took the pot and passed through the rooms of the Brajabasis and brought water from the well below. The Brajanganas caught sight of me from a distance, and confronted me as I returned through their house. One Brajangana blocked my way and said,

"Bengali, did you bring drinking water for your landlady?"

"Yes," I said, "I did."

"Will you please bring us a pot of water too, then?"

And while she was speaking, she let a tender arm of exquisite beauty fall right across my shoulder.

I understood that they were making fun of me for bringing the landlord's water. So I played along with them:

"Why? Is your maid-servant absent too?" I asked.

She replied,

"Oh, no, sir - the maid-servant has come. It's not that. Do you know what it really is? Today we don't want to drink water from the maid-servant's hand. We have got disgusted with drinking water that the maid-servant brings. How much sweeter the water would taste from your hands! That is what we would like to experience!"

Another one joined in:

"Yes, bhai[2], please bring us some water." Her voice was more musical than a lyre.

I rejoined in a humorous tone, in my broken Hindi:

"Is that possible? Even if I bring it, the water will remain the same. But yes, if you give me two or three cart-loads of sweets, I will first dump them into the well, and see if the water becomes sweeter!"

At these words they all laughed so hard that I thought they might end up rolling on the ground.

When the laughing stopped, she said,

"All right, we shall give you sweets, but not for the well. Bring us some water."

While this talk was going on, one of them quickly emptied their water-pot and handed it to me. I could not avoid bringing them water. Without any delay, I brought them some from the well. But I did not imagine how pleased they would be at getting me to do this insignificant work. When I returned, a Brajangana made a lump of many sandesh[3] into one big ball and put it in my hand and said,

"Take this prasad of Banke Behariji."

"Oh, what a piece of good luck!" I thought to myself. "I have received prasad of Lord Krishna from the hands of Brajanganas!"

I touched it to my forehead and took it. Inwardly, I had felt an intense aspiration to serve Brajabasis in Brindavan - that aspiration was fulfilled that day, when I went to work for the landlord!

From that day onwards, the Brajanganas offered me more opportunities to serve them. The next morning they gave me a different work. Laughing sweetly, with a murmuring sound, a Brajangana bearing a child on her arm, speaking to me as a sister or very dear one would do in our house, in an affectionate tone, standing very close and pushing me gently, placed her arm around my shoulder and said,

"Bengali, my baby is very ill. Would you please go and get some medicine?"

"Medicine?" I asked. "Wherer shall I get the medicine? Why don't you ask some Brajabasi to get it for you?"

Don't say that. Has he got time?"

"What is this? The baby is ill and he can't bring ..."

The Brajangana stopped me and said,

"He might bring it if it were real medicine; but it is not exactly a medicine ... I want some sugarcane roots."

"Sugarcane roots?" I asked. "But I don't know where sugarcane roots are available in Brindavan."

"I'm telling you where to go," she said.. "Don't you go every day to bathe in the Yamuna?"

"Well, yes, I do."

"All right - you know that stretch of fields which borders the Yamuna near where you bathe?"

"Yes."

"Well, in those fields the sugarcane is being harvested on many plots; and in some places the canes have been cut and the lands are being cleared. If you don't mind going a little way off your usual route, you can easily pick up a few roots still lying in the field ..."

"Fine!" I replied. "I can get you some before I bathe today. Just then another Brajangana, overhearing that I went to bathe every day in the Yamuna, came over and asked,

"Bengali, did you say that you go to the Yamuna every day?"

"Yes, Ma'am, why?" I asked

"Could you do something for me now and again?"

"Why now and again? I can do it every day, if necessary. Tell me what it is."

"Well," she said, "When you leave here, would you mind taking some wilted flowers we used yesterday, to cast them into the Yamuna water for me? If we kept everyday's flowers in one place, they rot. I cannot go to throw them in the Yamuna myself, because of my small baby ..."

As she spoke, a group of her friends had gathered around us. When they heard what she said, they all began to chime in one after the other,

"Yes, yes, can you take our used wilted flowers too?"

And lest I should not agree to do this service for them, lest I should feel burdened, they reassured me:

"You need not take them every day ... if you take them once in a week or so, that will do ..."

They would not have understood how happy I felt. Acutally, if somebody gave me one lakh of gold coins I would not be so pleased as I was then, on hearing their request. I was overjoyed, as if I had the sky in my hand! These Brajanganas meant to send their flowers, which had been used for Lord Krishna's worship, filled with their great love and aspiration, by my hands? How could I contain such good fortune!

So I rejoined in delight:

"Why once a week? Why not let me do it every day?"

I laid my shawl upon the ground in front of the ladies and said,

"Come, fill up my clothe with your flowers, I'll carry them on my head!"

"Oh, no! What are you doing, Bengali? Why in your shawl? The rotten flowers will stain it." They chorussed.

"Let it be stained a little. To me it will be a sign - an indication that I have taken part in your Krishna puja!" I replied.

They began grumbling: "Just see, how childish he is! Why in the shawl? - why not roll them in a old newspaper?"

One of them at once brought an old newspaper and held it in front of me.

I said, "Can this paper hold so many flowers? It will get torn and the flowers will fall onto the road."

"Why should it get torn? Put two or three pages on top of each other and go on rolling them up."

"No, no! My wrapper is better than that."

I began to tie the flowers in my wrapper and again they began to laugh, saying:

"That's good! There will be a sign on the shawl ..."

The next day I asked of my own accord for their wilted flowers to take and cast into the Yamuna; and they immediately agreed.

I had not noticed the previous day, but this time I saw that they came to me one by one, each with her separate packet of spoiled flowers. So I asked,

"Do you always do your pujas separately in your respective rooms? Don't you ever worship together?"

"Yes, we do that too. On special festival days we all get together. For instance, on the festivals of Ras, Dol, Jhulana and Janmashtami. The Brajabasis have their puja in the temple, and we do ours together in our room." They said.

"Really, is it true?"

"Do you think we are telling lies?"

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant, "I replied. "Why should you tell lies? But to me the thing is so wonderful it is just beyond my imagination. Do you know, I have had a great yearning for many days to watch your Krishna worship with my own eyes."

"But why should you have to yearn and beg so much for that?" They all cried together.

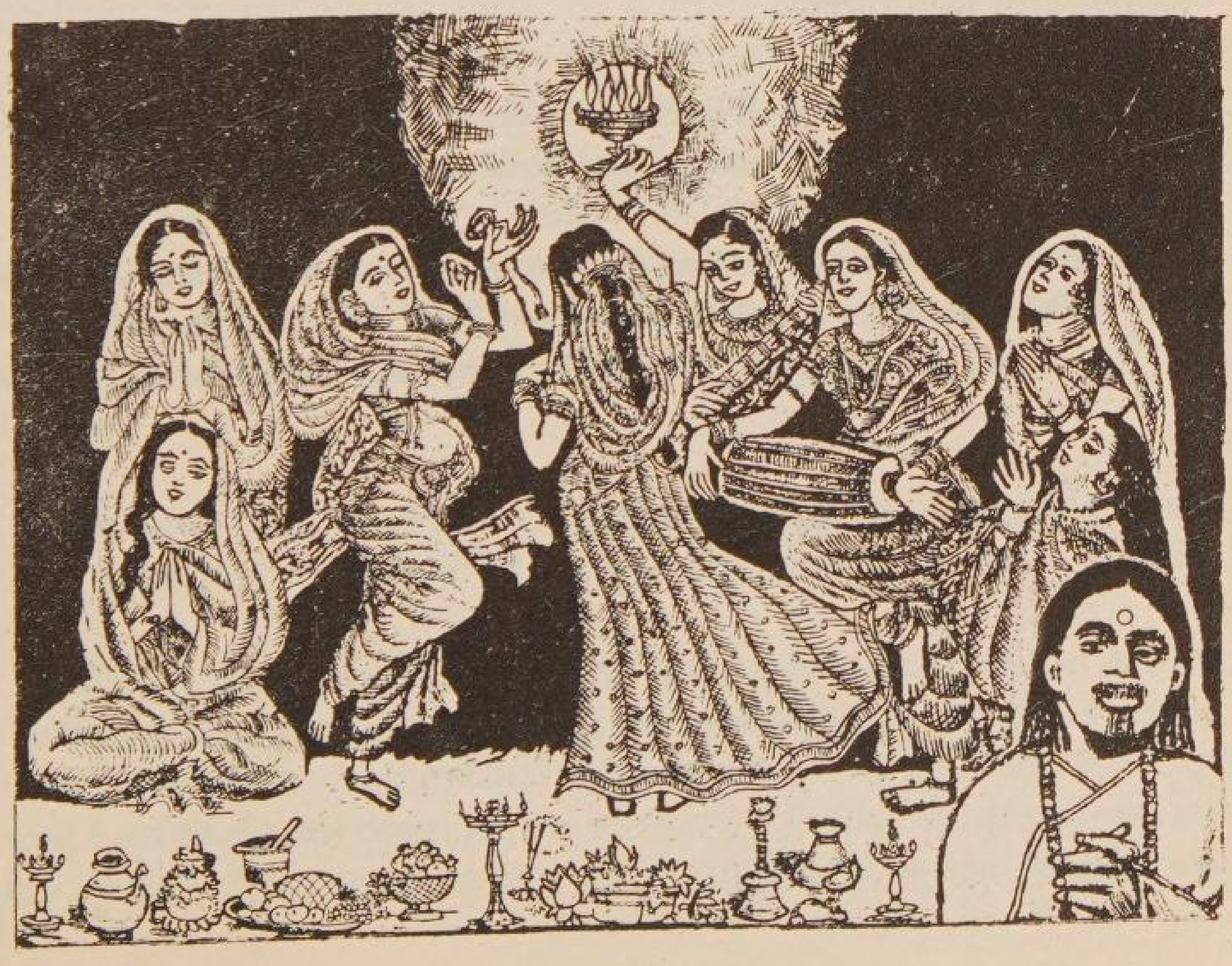
"What do you say? That's nothing to ask?"

"What is there to ask? You can see."

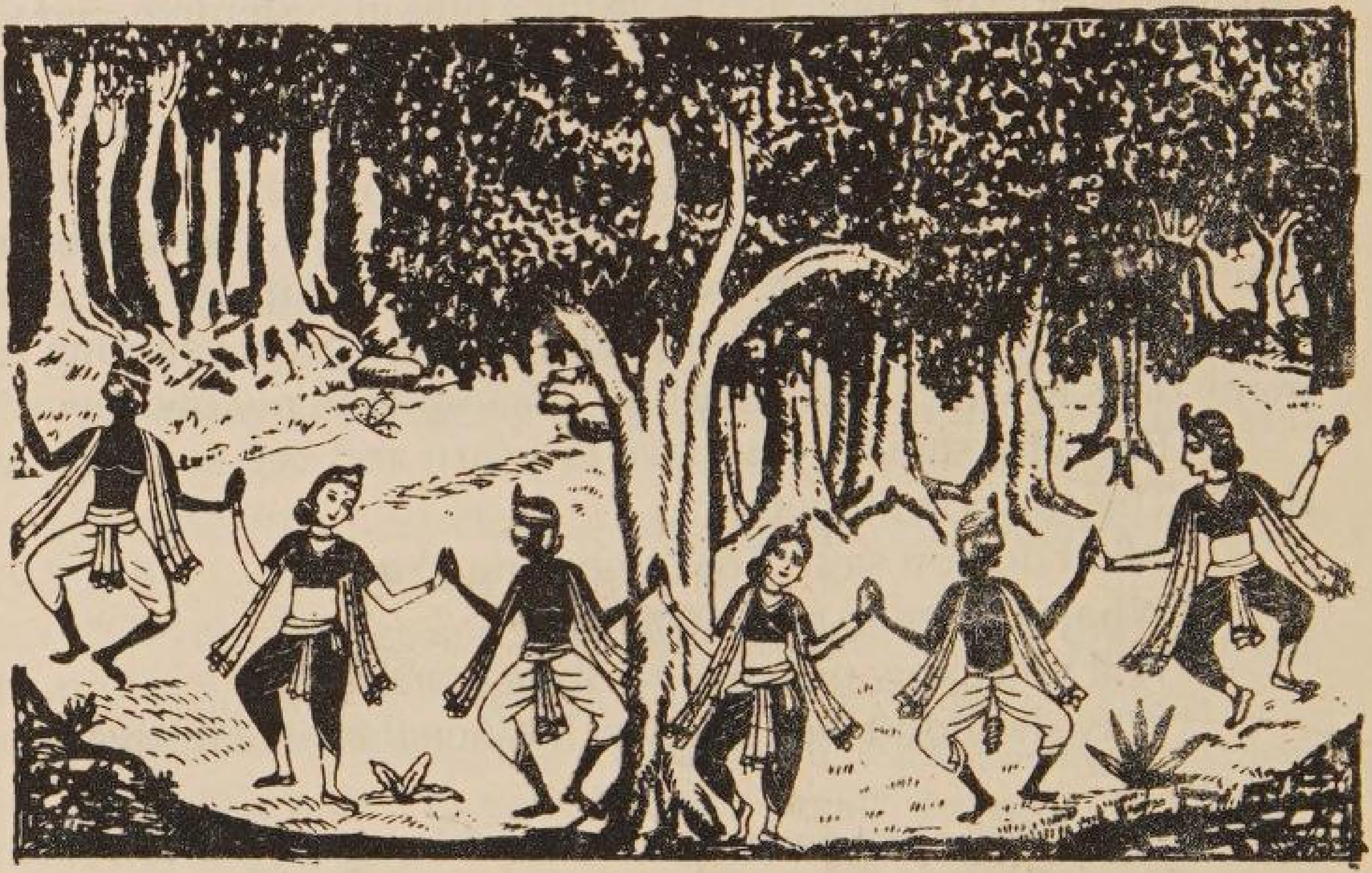
"Will you show me your Krishna worship?"

"Why shouldn't we show you? When there is a festival, you can come."

"Then I have just one request: let me bring all the flowers for your sacred occasion."



The Brajanganas burst out laughing. They were pleased at my request, and I knew that their happy laughter implied consent to my proposal.



Notes and Reference

1. A clarinet - like musical instrument played at festivities. A musical mode usually played in the morning, and denoting the feeling of separation.

2 'Bhai' acutally means brother. But no one should think that the Branjanganas tried to establish a brother relationship with me. They use this term in addressing everyone, from husband to friend as a cook applies salt to every dish.

3 A kind of sw,eetmeat made of milk.

Chapter Twelve

I began to daydream about the future: at present I was saving ten paise a day for services rendered to the landlord and his wife. When I had accumulated fifty or sixty rupees, I would purchase a train ticket to Pondicherry. I would also buy a brand new shirt and dhoti. It would feel good to be dressed as a gentleman when I met the Mother there at the Ashram. The clothes I had been wearing every day would just not be suitable for that occasion - and they might get torn in the meantime. And if I could only manage to get to the Mother in Pondicherry, oh - all my worries would be at an end: she would take charge of my whole life from that moment on!

The collecting of fifty or sixty rupees, of course, would not happen overnight; in fact, when I began to calculate how long it would take, I realised that it would be between two and three years. But be that as it might, the time element did not seem to matter . . . after all, these days in Brindavan were passing quite happily - even more so since I had come into contact with these Brajabasis and Brajanganas and had the opportunity to serve them.

But one fine day, this daydream of mine came crashing down into fragements. How? Well, that's the story I'm about to tell:

Every day I would perform my ablutions at noon in the Yamuna; afterwards, spreading my wet dhoti on the grassy bank of the river to dry in the sun, I would remain sitting there. It's true that I sat there not opening my eyes... for in the middle of the day my eyes had no work to do; so I would sit there with my eyes closed.

One day when I opened my eyes, I saw that my dhoti had miraculously disappeared from right under my nose. I might have been there half an hour, or at the utmost an hour... yet within this short time the cloth had vanished, as if by a conjuring trick! There was a strong breeze blowing out there in the open; but lest the wind should carry it off I had tied both ends of the cloth securely with grass and creepers. Moreover, I was sitting right on the bank; all around were fields full of ripe wheat, its spiky ears standing up - so the cloth could not have flown very far. It might have got caught on the wheat... I searched high and low, up and down, for quite a way around, several times. But not a trace of it was to be found.

This particular spot on the Yamuna was quite secluded; there were seldom any passers-by. And why, I wondered, should anyone want to take my cloth? It was so old and worn - I could not imagine that anyone else would want it. So there were two questions : why did it happen, and how?

And then it suddenly dawned on me that this stealing of clothes was nothing new in Brindavan: it had been going on there since ancient times.

I wondered, "Are clothes still being stolen in Brindavan? But would even my dhoti be stolen because of that custom? What romance does it contain?"

And I answered myself: "Perhaps there is some. Probably that thief could not forget this old habit, even today. Or maybe that thief has some intention in stealing my dhoti - perhaps he wants to take me away from Brindavan."

But it was some consolation to me to realise that my cloth was in the possession of the Divine Thief![1]

Anyway after searching for a long time, when I still could not find my dhoti anywhere, I wrapped my shawl around my waist and returned to my shelter in the cave. That day I could not attend the Bhagavat reading and the Gopi-song.

So the next day I urgently needed to purchase a dhoti . . . if not a superfine ten-cubit long 'Sengupta' cloth, then at least six cubits of coarse cloth. And I had to buy it that very morning - otherwise I would not be able to go to the chhatras for food nor anywhere else.

Where there is income, there is expenditure. As long as I had no source of income I had not a single paise-worth of expense. But now that I had begun to earn, I found myself having to spend those earnings. And it was not only the dhoti.... my napkin too served notice at the same time that after a few days it would start a non-cooperation movement against me.

I thought to myself, "No! Hoarding up ten paise a day like this, it will never be possible to collect the train-fare to Pondicherry; not to think of two or three years... even in ten years it will not be done."

I saw that this attempt was absurd - like the effort of the mother-bird in the story, who tried to save its drowning chick by emptying the sea, removing all the water with its beak. Perhaps at first I had miscalculated the thing, or perhaps, knowing it to be absurd, I still tried, as a drowning man clutches at a straw. But no longer. Now I felt it imperative to reach Pondicherry by any means!

Just at this moment of desperation, I chanced to make contact with a sadhu who had taken a vow of silence. He lived in the old Govindaji temple. He was respected by one and all in the community. His needs were the barest minimum: in the coldest months he still wore only a loin-cloth, and he lived in a cave in the temple compound. He had neither servant nor disciples, and refused all gifts that were offered to him. Each day he went to one single chharta, eating only dal and chapattis.

It was said that he was Bengali and had once been a judge. No one knew his age, but he had a youthful look about him, and his expression had a childlike simplicity. Not one white hair was to be seen on his head, and he had all his teeth. He was believed to be a realised soul, and many people would go to him to be blessed. Pilgrims went to see him as they went to see Govindaji. Rich merchants would feel themselves blessed if they could manage to make a little gift of something to him - but he did not give anyone that opportunity.

He would occupy his days by going to the temples of Brindavan and besmearing his whole body with holy *roja* dust by lying down and rolling along the ground; the rest of the time he would sit alone in the high window of the portico of the Govindaji temple.

In the evenings on those days when there was no Bhagavat reading I would go and sit beside him. He neither invited nor refused anybody, and would speak nothing to anyone whatever they did - even if they sat beside him and chatted... he would always remain silent. Nevertheless, just being near him gave me a very good feeling.

On that day too I went and sat beside him in the temple. But I don't know what happened that day... the saint looked at me and smiled a little. When I saw that reasonless smile of his, I felt that he was showing me his grace. I offered him my respects, and then felt moved to say,

"O Maharajji, I shall be much benefitted if you would be gracious enough to give me some guidance on a certain matter. I have been feeling an impulse to tell you about it for a long time, but did not dare."

The saint at once gestured to me to sit beside him and tell him the whole story. So I spoke to him about my problem:

"I cannot remain in Brindavan; on the other hand I find no way to go to Pondicherry. Please show me how to do it."

He listened to everything attentively, sometimes raising his hand, or lowering it; sometimes he drew something on the stone floor... he clearly communicated his message to me:

"Go by any way that you can to Pondicherry. I say that it will be very good for you."

"The only way that I can go is without a ticket," I replied. "Are you suggesting that I should travel without a ticket?"

The saint intimated to me,

"When you have no other means, go in that way. You will see that God will help you." And his resolute expression imprinted his message upon me.

Well, that was all I needed to hear. There was no further obstacle to prevent me from going to Pondicherry. No special preparation was needed : any day, perhaps tomorrow or the day after, I could set out. Only before I left, the news of my departure must be given to the landlord so that he could appoint another man for his work.

So the following morning I finished my madhukari in the chhatras and then headed for my landlord's residence. As I was walking along, I happened to meet the Vaishnava woman who was the landlord's maid-servant. She was having difficulty in carrying a table fan; she had to keep changing hands order to manage it. Noticing her difficulty, I hurried to in catch up with her and said,

"As we are going to the same place, let me help you."

She handed me the fan without any hesitation and walked beside me as I went along.

This Vaishnava woman was quite young, but even so she was as sober as an old woman. She wore no ornaments, and was dressed like a widow in a simple white cloth. Although I had often done her work of carrying water, she had never spoken to me. But when I took the heavy fan from her hand, she was very happy, and words began to flow from her mouth. She said,

"Bengali, I wish you could do all my work. In fact, you are often doing all my work... several times I took leave so that you could get the work."

"But you did not even once tell me so!"

"How could I tell you? You come when I get leave. Besides the landlord's wife is such a strict lady. But I'm telling you now - why not do all my work?"

I said, "If you give up the work to me, I shall enjoy the advantage... but how will you manage?"

"I will manage", she said proudly. "There's no lack of work for me in Brindavan. I work in five other houses too. Then I have another permanent job each month in the 'Hare - Ram' assembly for singing; and then there is my mother at home - so what have I to worry about?"

"How did you know that I have problems and am not well-off?" I asked.

"It's not hard to understand. I can see it clearly. Otherwise would anyone do this massage job for ten paise?"

The answer was certainly humiliating to me; but then I had no sense of honour or insult; besides, that very day I was going to resign from that work - so her blow did not touch me in the least. I told her, "Do you know, I am going to resign from that work? I have come to give the landlord notice that I am leaving."

"Why are you resigning? Doesn't it suit you?" the Vaishnava woman asked me.

"No."

"But will you do a good job, if I find one for you? I have a good job in hand."

"I don't know what your work is. If you had told me before, I would have tried it. But now I don't need any work- I am leaving Brindavan."

She asked, "Where are you going? To your village?"

"Not to my village. I am going to Pondicherry."

"When will you come back?"

"I shall not come back. I'm going to settle there."

Perhaps she could not believe it. She stared in my face. But I had no time to convince her, for as we spoke we had arrived at the ground floor of the landlord's place. So I gave her back the table-fan and went up to his room.

I was afraid that he might be angry with me. How should I frame my words? Perhaps he would not allow me to go. But when I told him that I would like to go away to Pondicherry, he did not object in the least. Instead he was most encouraging, and said,

"You want to go to Pondicherry. That is very good. You will be in your spritual master's place. Can I hinder you? Don't worry about my work. You can go any day you like. The anchorite will fetch some other person. My very best wishes go with you!"

So I bid him goodbye. It was a warm, cordial parting.

As I walked down the lanes of that neighbourhood for the last time that day, I met one of the Brajanganas. This was quite unusual. Every other day I had run into groups of them along this path, but I never found any of them strayed from the bevy - they always moved in a group.

So I asked the lady whom I met,

"Your house seems to be empty...where are your other friends?"

"Oh, our other friends?" she answered, "They went to Mathura city yesterday to see the holy festival."

"Really? What is the occasion?"

"The day after tomorrow will be Full Moon. They have gone to their paternal homes to celebrate the holy festival of *Dol*."

"And all their paternal homes are in Mathura?"

"Not all... they have all gone to the home of one of them."

"Oh, I see! Just like in our place. In our place too all the housewives crowd into the paternal home of one of them. But when will they return?"

"After three or four days."

"Then I shan't see them. I am going away tomorrow!" I said.

"Why? Why? Where are you going?" She sounded quite anxious.

"Far away... to Pondicherry."

"When will you come back?"

"Never," I said. "I'm going to settle there."

"Oh, don't say that you'll never return! One should not say such a thing in Brindavan!"

"One shouldn't?" I was astonished.

"No. Whether you will come back or not, still say that you will come again. When you come again, be sure to remember to visit us!" she said.

There was sympathy in her voice.

"Yes," I said. "I shall come again and meet you all some day."

So this too was a very cordial farewell.

I had taken leave all round. But still I did not feel satisfied. My whole being did not give its assent and say -

"All right - all is well: I have had a good escape from Brindavan!"

Although I had made up my mind to start the next day, still a slender hope lingered somewhere that the day of departure might be postponed a little. Perhaps the landlord might ask me to wait a few days to allow him to find a new man for his work. Then before I set out on my uncertain road, a few more days would be spent in delight.

But no! My stay in Brindavan was to end the very next day. So many special things had happened to me each day, and tomorrow it was all the become past history; no longer would I be able to see the Yamuna, or the evening adoration of the light (*arati*) in Govindaji's temple, nor join the congregation for the Bhagavat reading in Gopinath's temple, nor enjoy the holy company of Brajabasis and Brajanganas.

As Sri Radha put it :

"I know not how much honey there is
In the name of Shyama!
My mouth cannot rest
Without singing that name!"

This same sense of sweetness, I now felt about the whole of Brindavan and a terrible cry of sorrow arose in my heart at the thought of leaving it all.

But still, I had to leave Brindavan, and definitely the next day! That was all there was to it - no more turning back!

And there remained only one job to do before leaving: to make the best use of the remaining money that I had received from the landlord.

After buying cloth, I was left with two or three rupees. This money would be of no use to me along the way . . . and if I was going to travel without a ticket, wouldn't it be most inappropriate to buy refreshments along the way? If I kept these rupees with me, I felt that I would be guilty of not keeping full faith in Him to whom I was going. For my subsistence along the way I decided to rely on the Divine alone... I would go as my master carried me all the way.

So from the landlord's house I went straight to Banke Behariji's temple; I purchased some milk sweets from his bazaar with my remaining coins, and offered them in worship to Banke Behariji. But I don't know why, after completing the puja, the priest kept only a very little *prasad* and returned most of the sweets to me. This very rarely happens.

What was I going to do with all this prasad? One should not eat prasad of the deity alone. If I had guessed that this situation would arise, I would have offered my coins to the deity instead... then they would have been used in his service.

I stood in the courtyard of the temple and looked around to see if anybody was there to accept the prasad. But no. It was mid-day.

I found nobody to whom I might distribute it. I felt puzzled. There were only two priests inside the temple, and an old Vaishnava woman in the courtyard who was accompanying herself on a tambourine as she sang over and over her praise of Lord Krishna.

I went and stood beside her with the intention of offering her the prasad when she ended her song... but it seemed as if she might never stop singing; she was repeating a few words over and over to the beat of her tambourine :

"Victory, victory to Gopal,
Victory to Govinda -
Radha's lover Hari."

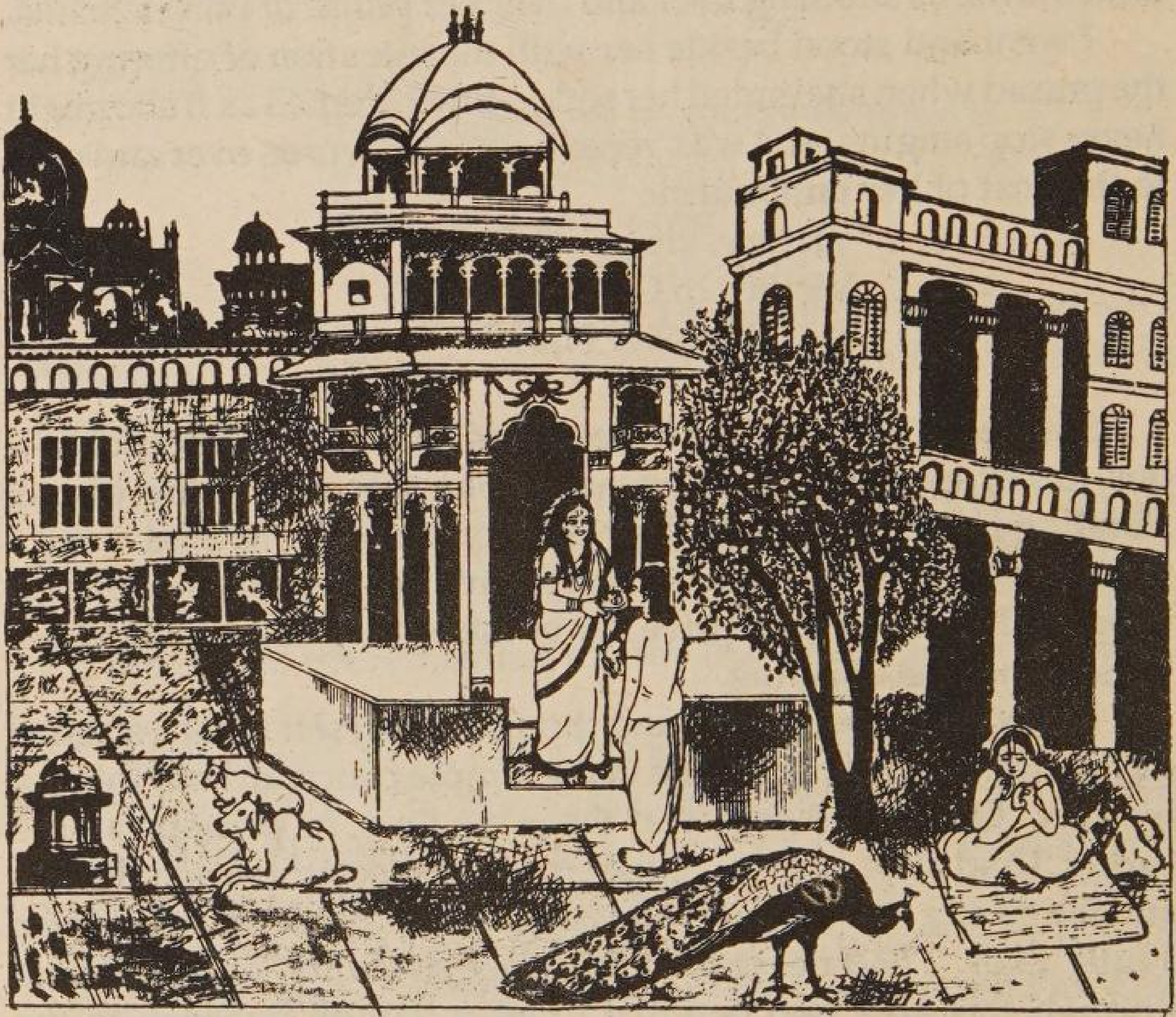
She was quite absorbed in deep meditation, completely oblivious to her external consciousness. She was not aware of me, standing in front of her with prasad for such a long time. I felt I must not interrupt her meditation to give her this physical *prasad;* it would be wrong to deprive her of the ecstasy of inner spiritual prasad she was enjoying.

I stood there before her and thought to myself what a strange day it was! There was no one in the temple courtyard but this old woman. On any other day at the same time, or perhaps a little earlier, I had always seen a huge crowd of spectators and pilgrims and the throng of anchorites and beggars. Of course, that day I was a little later. I had never seen this place so empty. I used to pass through this area two or three times a day on my way to the landlord's house . . . but I had never seen it like this.

I began to wonder whether the fact of being unable to distribute the prasad were a sign of Radharani's displeasure with me!

But just then I was confronted by a most remarkable sight: a beautiful young Vaishnava woman came out of the door of the temple.

In all the many months that I had been in Brindavan, never had I seen such an exquisitely beautiful femal Vaishnava. Most of those I had seen were widows... almost all of them were aged and had their heads shaven. But this woman was young and exceedingly lovely. She had the vermilion mark of a married woman in the parting of her hair, and sandalpaste artistically painted on her nose and forehead as if she were freshly dressed; she wore a fined yellow-coloured cloth with a blue border; a few delicate bracelets graced her wrists, and there was something finely aristocratic about her mien.



She caught my full attention. I was still thinking about my problem... "Oh God! After waiting for so long, at last someone has come... but will it be possible to give her prasad? Will she accept it from me? How can I ask such a rich man's wife to take prasad?"

But how wonderful! The Vaishnava lady came straight into the courtyard where I was standing and stood in front of me, smiling, with both hands outstretched...

A miracle indeed! I felt completely blessed and contented.

But then my thoughts began to flow in another direction:

"How did she even know that I want to distribute prasad? I was just standing here with the leaf-packet in my hand - I didn't call her in any way. How is it that she holds her hands out towards me?"

But this thought peeped into my mind only for a moment. Then she smiled at me and all my questions faded into the background... the next moment I forgot everything; I only felt extremely grateful because I had at last found someone to whom I could give prasad.

I filled her two hands with sweets. Looking very pleased, she moved away as if to leave the temple.

As she moved, I looked down at my packet of prasad. Even after filling her hands, quite a quantity still remained in the packet. My few coins had purchased quite a large amount of sweets: at that time in Brindavan milk was sold at thirty or forty paise a kilo, and condensed milk or *rabri* cost only seventy or eighty paise per kilo. I would just have to go on waiting for someone else to come along to whom I could distribute the rest of the prasad!

I blamed myself: "Good heavens! If I had only been a little more intelligent, I would have given her the whole packet! Then I wouldn't have had to keep on standing here. After so much waiting, Radharani sent me someone, and I couldn't take advantage of the opportunity! Again I shall have to wait expectantly, not knowing when someone may appear!"

So I prayed to Radharani to send me someone else, and resumed my austerity of waiting. Again I looked around me to see if anyone were approaching from behind. I went back to the old woman who was still chanting, to see whether she had returned to her normal consciousness... but she was still singing as before with her eyes closed. No one else appeared.

After I had been standing there for a while, I suddenly saw the same young Vaishnava lady again. Again she was coming out of the same temple-door that she had come from before.

"How strange! I didn't see her going back that way. How is it that she comes out of the same door again? I'm sure there is no other way into the temple." I thought.

But there was no time to think more . . . my mind was filled with delight and gratitude that at last I would be able to finish distributing the prasad - that Radharani had not let my desire remain unfulfilled, she had sent someone to me. "Thank you, Radharani, thank you!"

The lady came towards me smiling as before and again stood with outstretched palms in front of me. But this time there seemed to be some humour in her smile.

I thought, "I have recognised her... perhaps that is why she smiles like that; or she may be smiling with bashfulness because she has come to me with outstretched hands a second time."

But I had no other thought about her coming twice... for who knows how long I might have had to wait for any other recipient. I intended that I would distribute all the prasad and take only a small crumb myself... even if I had to wait until the evening, that is what I would do. So I was delighted that I had obtained a candidate.

Again I filled both her hands with sweets, full of gratitude and delight. With a very pleased and happy look, she glanced once at my face, laughed a strange little laugth, and went back through the same temple door.

Up to that moment the whole incident appeared quite normal to my consciousness - no question arose in my mind as to the reality or unreality of it. A few crumbs still remained in the packet. I put a few into my mouth and smeared the rest over my body. Then I offered obeisance with a prayer:

"O dear God! I cannot express in words how grateful I am to you! I had a great yearning to live in Brindavan for ever. You did not fulfil that wish. If after that you had also refused to fulfil this small desire, if I had been unable to find anyone to accept the prasad, I would have had a complaint against you for ever! So thank you for finding a suitable recipient."

As I paid my obeisance and gave thanks, the laughing face of the Vaishnava woman floated before my eyes. Suddenly an impossible thought entered my mind:

"Wasn't it Radharani herself who appeared to me in the guise of that Vaishnava woman? Not once, but twice she came. Would any gentle lady do that? Wouldn't she feel shy?

No! Surely it was something exceptional!" I answered myself.

But that was as far as I went. I had hardly taken two steps outside the Banke Behariji temple when the whole experience vanished from my mind.

That night, as I was about to enter the cave where I always slept, I was introduced to a Bengali gentleman who had come on tour with his wife and children and was lodging in the Mirzapur Dharmashala. He had heard that I was a Bengali, and had come to see me, probably out of curiosity.

He introduced himself to me and asked,

"How long have you been away from home? You seem to have been on the move for quite a long time!"

"You have guessed correctly... I have been moving around for quite a time." I answered.

"Where else did you go?" the gentleman wanted to know.

"I didn't go anywhere else. I came directly to Brindavan and I haven't left since."

He liked this; he said,

"Good! That's very good, to stay in one place. What is the good of running to ten places? It is good to settle down in one place. I like this idea very much. But how can I do it? I have come with my wife and children... to satisfy them I have had to go to many places, and I shall have to go to more in the future. If it weren't for my family, I should do the same as you... I would sit quietly for as long as I wished, somewhere right here in Brindavan! You know, they say that only after performing many virtuous deeds can a man come here to Brindavan. But it's not enough to come here only once. Not everyone is fortunate enough to live in Brindavan... only one who has done good deeds in many births and whom Radharani favours can live in Brindavan!....

"How long have you been here, sir?"

"About eight months", I replied.

When he heard this, the gentleman grew quite intoxicated with delight :

"What? You have been living in Brindavan for eight months! Then you are fortunate indeed!"

I smiled and said,

"Why do you think I am so fortunate? Even though I have lived here for eight months I have neither grown an extra head, nor four hands like a god! What is so important about the length of time one spends here?"

"Whatever you may say, sir, you can't deceive me ... do you mean to say that after living here so long, you haven't yet had the *Darshan*[1] of Radha and Krishna? Tell me the truth!"

And he gazed into my face with such a look of faith and assurance that I felt reluctant to disappoint him. I understood that he had been lucky - he had been given the *Darshan* of Radha and Krishna soon after his arrival in Brindavan; but I had not received it, Radha and Krishna had not had compassion on me even once!

So I cried out in great sorrow:

"Alas! I have not had their *Darshan* even once! All this time I have spent here, without having their direct *Darshan*!"

"What is that? Though you have been living for so long in Brindavan, you have not received Radha-Krishna's Darshan? I heard that many Brajabasis have spoken with them in dreams and in the waking state. A lot of devotees still see their divine play of manifestation with their physical eyes. And just in a few days - our Annada Thakur, who saw the image of the Supreme Mother in Bengal, got the physical sight of Radha and Krishna as soon as he entered Brindavan. Yet you who have lived so many days here could not see anything? It is amazing!"

I could not help agreeing with him. And told him:

"Yes, it is indeed amazing! You see how Radha and Krishna have cheated me. I came to Brindavan hoping to live here forever and they did not allow me to do that - and they did not even once grant me the physical sight of themselves. I am a very wretched person... that's why I did not get what everyone else gets here!"

In my sorrow, I felt an intense disgust with myself. As I lay on my bed in the cave that night I told myself:

"How can I blame Radha-Krishna ? It is not their fault in the least! Why should I be granted their Darshan? Can anyone be given anything unless he desires it? I did not even once aspire for the Darshan of Radha-Krishna; the lack of it has not caused me the slightest pain. Though I was living in Brindavan, I have uttered only Sri Aurobindo's name day and night. Even before Radha and Krishna I prayed - "O Lord, both of you please appear before me in the form of Sri Aurobindo!" Though I got a unique opportunity to worship Radha and Krishna in the Damodar temple, I rejected it lest I should forget Sri Aurobindo. Because of my devotion to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother I have not been able to grow close to Radha-Krishna. So why should they vouchsafe me their gracious Darshan? How can I blame Radha and Krishna for not giving me their Darshan when I never gave them the chance to do so?"

Turning these things over in my mind, I somehow fell asleep. But all of a sudden I was startled to hear Radharani's voice. She was saying to me,

"Twice I came to you and took prasad from your hand, and still you don't recognise me!"

I sat up straight in bed. Deep in my heart there was a deep flow of happiness: "Ah! It is true . . . I too have had the living sight and touch of Radharani!"

And the mien of the Vaishnava lady at Banke Behariji's shrine appeared vividly before my eyes: that dramatic situation in the solitude of noon, my long wait, her dazzling and unusual beauty, the way she came out of the temple twice - a temple with only one entrance - her acceptance of the prasad not only once but twice, and her final disappearance into the temple . . . all these details grew profoundly meaningful; all those small things I had hardly noticed at the time now rushed back to me!

I was so grateful and delighted that I could not sleep. Throughout the night, time and time again I went over those words, and Radharani's appearance in the guise of a Vaishnava lady kept coming back to my eyes. I spent the rest of the night cherishing each small event of the day which had just passed.

But the story of my time in Brindavan is not yet over. I must go back to something else which happened. For another wonderful incident occurred on the very same day... and this too was of a kind that even today I have difficulty in explaining it.

It was after Radharani had twice taken my prasad. After I left the temple, I set off for my bath in the Yamuna as I used to do every day. I had already finished my madhukari. I carried with me some bread and cooked dal in an aluminium pot. When I had finished my ablutions in the Yamuna, I would eat them there.

Crossing both Dangoli and Mangoli lanes, I went a little further and came into the wheat fields which extended as far as the Yamuna banks. On the way I met someone I had never seen before.

He was carrying a typical Vaishnava bag, or madhukari wallet, over his shoulder. His skin was the colour of a dark storm-cloud; his eyes were very large and beautiful, and their expression was not commonplace but blazing with love and devotion. Above the peak of his forehead was a charming tuft of hair. A long Vaishnava mark in sandalwood-paste ran the length of his nose. He wore a tight-fitting dhoti as a Bengalee would, and above it a waistcoat or jacket. He held a nice bamboo flute in his hand.

In fact, all his gestures and movements, his physique and even his complexion were typically those of Sri Krishna as we see him depicted in our scriptures and story books.

But do you know what I thought, even seeing someone as beautiful as Sri Krishna? When I first saw him at a distance, I wondered whether I had seen him in some chhatra some days before... or perhaps I had not seen him because he did not live in Brindavan.

But with this, all curiosity about the stranger vanished from my mind... everything seemed quite natural.

The two of us were passing through the wheat fields on different ridges: I was walking along the ridge of one big plot of land, and he along anothe one. After a while our paths met, and we came face to face.

Then the stranger asked me,

"Where are you going in the heat of the noonday sun?"

He spoke in the dialect of East Bengal, and his voice was wonderfully sweet.

"I am going to bathe in the Yamuna," I answered. "What about you?"

"I'll go there too," he replied. "I've never been to this part of the Yamuna. Let me come with you to bathe."

"Don't you live in Brindavan?" I asked. "Why do you say you have never come to this part?"

"Yes, I live in Brindavan," he said, "but I've never been this side."

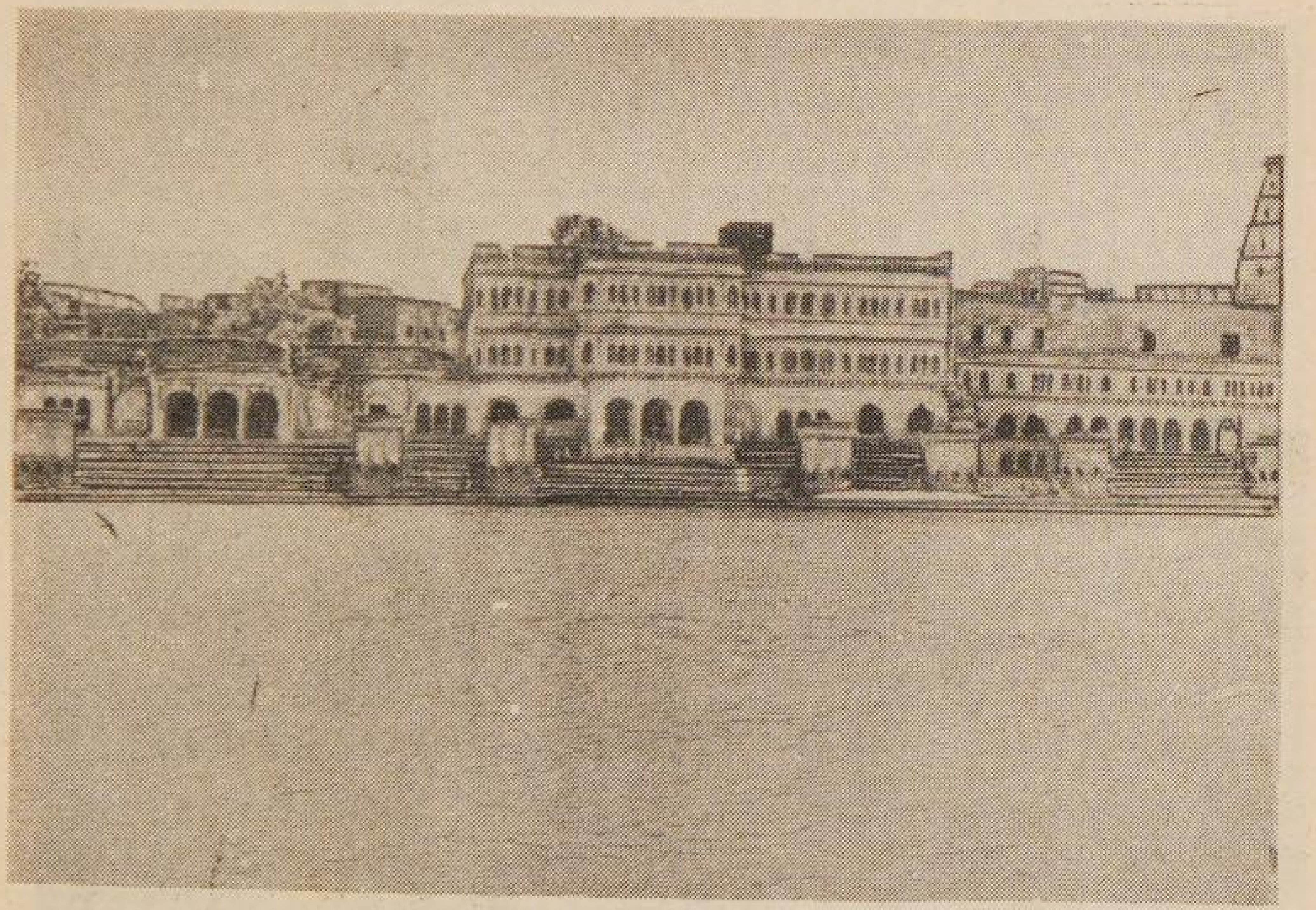
"Oh, I see" I replied. "Where do you stay?"

"At Keshi's Ghat", he replied.

I did not know where that was, so I asked him,

"Where is that?"

He pointed to the north bank of the Yamuna and said, "Over there, where you can see a dilapidated building, half-submerged in the river... that is Keshi's ghat."



"Oh, is that what it's called? I've often been there. You reach it by the road that goes through Gopinath bazaar, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that the place where Sri Krishna slew the gian Keshi? And that's why it is called Keshi's ghat?"

"I live as I can... I don't hear so much news," he answered briefly.

I said, "Yes, I have read in books... Sri Krishna slew Keshi, Putana and other giants."

"Maybe," he replied.

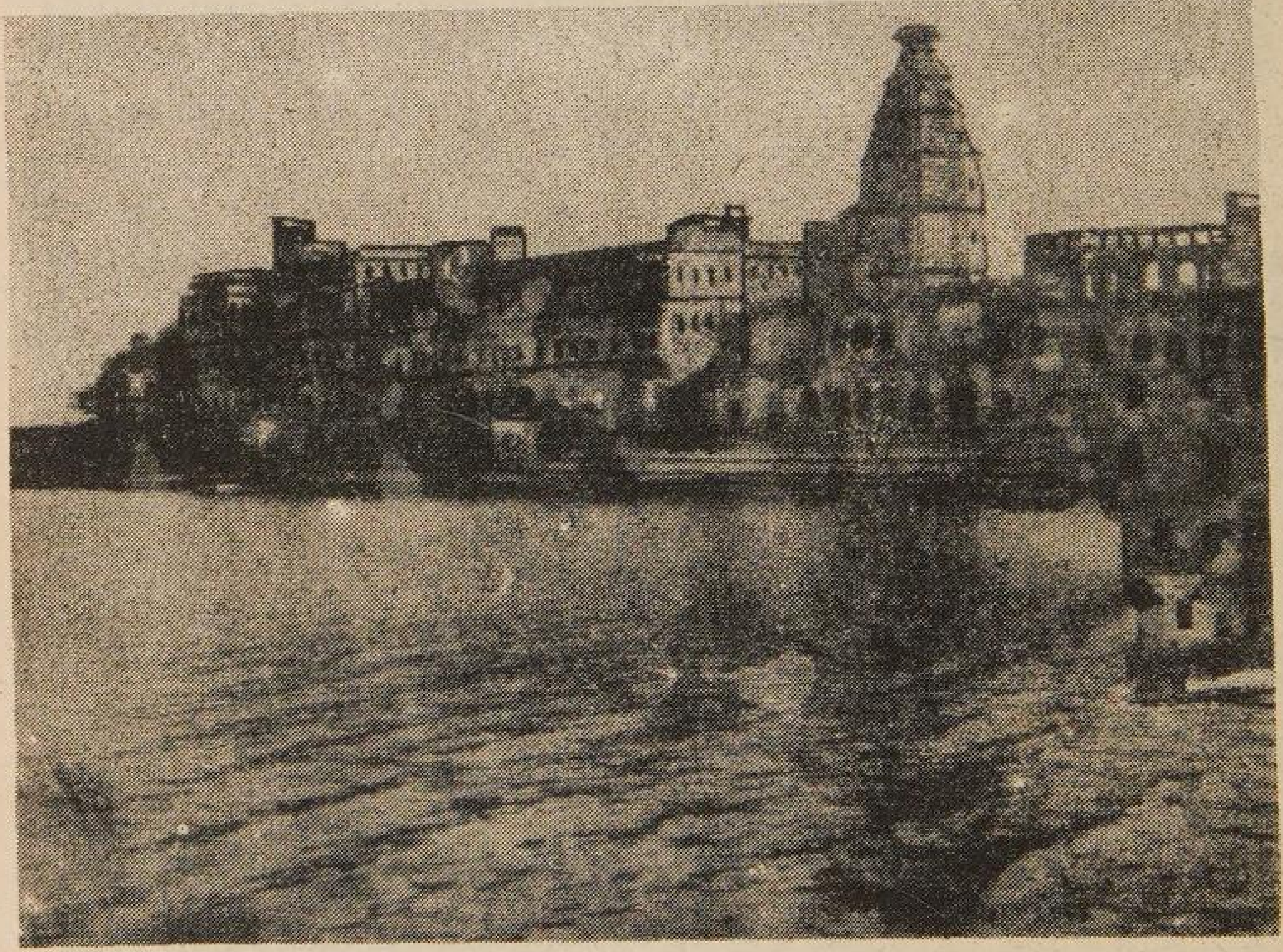
"In what part of Keshi's ghat do you stay?" I asked.

"There, in that building you can see in the water... I live in that."

"How can you live in that?" I exclaimed in dismay and surprise.

But he replied quite easily, "Yes, I live there."

"But I see that the building is lying, collapsed into the water. How can you live in those conditions?"



"Even though it has fallen into the water, the upper portion is still habitable. I stay in those parts. I have been there a long time, so I have grown accustomed to all the inconveniences."

I said, "Well, how is there such a strong current in that part of the river? I still remember the bathing placewhere I bathed when I first came to Brindavan...the water didn't even cover my knees!"

"Oh, you must have bathed on the shallow side of the river. This side is still deep and swift-flowing. This deep side fills up each year during the monsoon floods, and that water remains there well into the rest of the year," he answered.

Conversing thus, we reached the Yamuna. we put down the things we were carrying and our clothes upon the bank and both went down into the river and immersed ourselves fully. Then climbing back up onto the bank we spread out our cloths to dry and went and sat side by side on the dry sand right at the edge of the water.

I said to him,

"We have just bathed in the Yamuna... now let us sit for a while in silence - what do you think?"

He said,

"It's a very good proposal, and its object is good too."

I added,

"Just for a little while....then we shall share the food in my pot."

He closed his eyes and sat in meditation; at his side, I too closed my eyes.

How long we remained like that, I have no idea. I suddenly heard him say,

"Are you listening? Today is a very auspicious day!"

At that moment I was so deep in meditation that I could not at once respond to him. He waited a moment and then repeated,

"Did you hear what I said? This is a most auspicious day. Such an auspicious conjunction has not occurred for a long time!"

This time I stirred a little in my meditation, and tried to indicate to him that I was attending to his words.

He went on,

"And see, we are in these surroundings...we are on the holy bank of the Yamuna, we have bathed in it and become pure and spotless. I shall give you initiation today..."

This time, as soon as his words reached my ears, my meditation broke abruptly. Startled, I said,

"What? What did you say? You want to give me initiation?"

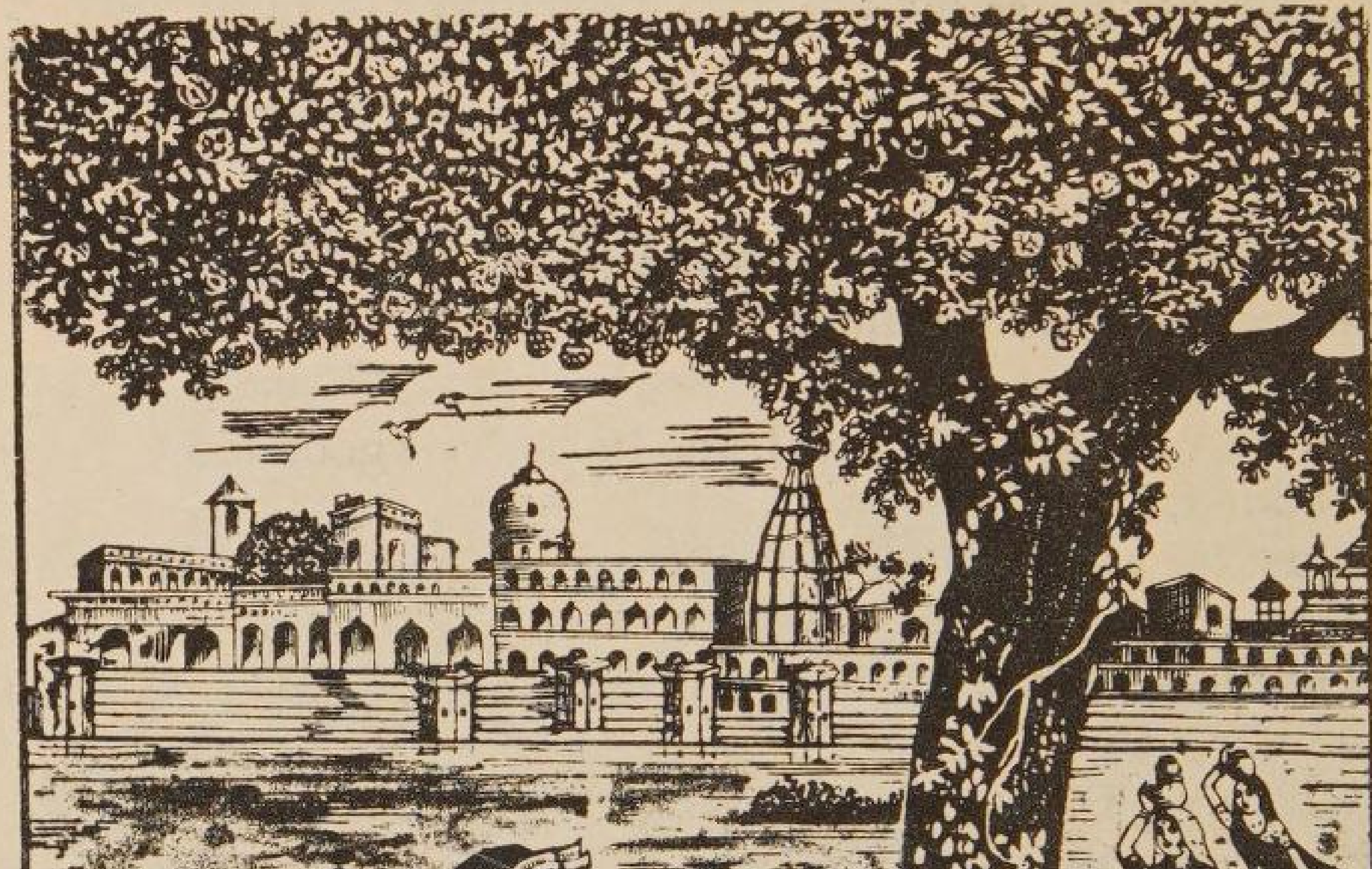
"Yes, I'll give you initiation."

"But I have already been initiated. I have a spiritual master. A second time is not necessary."

"What does it matter? The disciple is one, but masters can be many."

"Maybe. But I have been initiated once. I don't want to be initiated again." I said.

But while speaking, he had moved closer to me. He was about to take me by the hand and put his mouth to my ear.



I didn't know what to do. I thought,

"Will the boat sink, so close to the shore? I have gone on so long, avoiding initiation in so many places - now I am just about to leave Brindavan. Now I am about to depart, is something undesirable going to happen?"

Within myself I started to call to my master,

"O master, what is the meaning of all this? I am weak, I am helpless, please protect me!"

Meanwhile, that Krishna was fully prepared to give me initiation... he was delaying only because I had not agreed.

Once again he said,

"Take initiation from me. It will be good for you!"

When I heard these words a thought came suddenly into my mind: "What if he were Sri Krishna himself? Outwardly he looks like Sri Krishna as we see him in pictures. What if he who cannot be seen even after many austerities has come himself to give me initiation?"

With my mind carried away in two opposing currents, I felt out of my depth in a moment. Anxious thoughts went racing through my mind:

"What shall I do? Which side should I take? On one hand there is Sri Aurobindo's message: Don't go to anybody - I have accepted you'; and on the other hand this one in the guise of Sri Krishna is saying: 'The disciple is one. but masters are many; take initiation from me, it will be good for you'."

Sri Radha also had to face such a problem one day in Brindavan. She discarded lineage, honour, chastity and everything, and chose Sri Krishna alone. She said to her female companions:

> "Go and tell, O friend! everyone in town...
> Princess Radha has sunk into a sea of disrepute,
> An ocean of calumny, for Krishna's sake!"

I made the same choice.

To me, Sri Aurobindo is Krishna. I had surrendered to Sri Aurobindo in the morning of my life, and he had promised me first, before Sri Krishna, 'You are mine!' So I chose Sri Aurobind alone. I began to beg him repeatedly,

"Oh, Master, save me! I want nothing but you. Even if he really is Sri Krishna, I don't want ot take initiation from him. Let all my good fortune and future prospects vanish utterly - you alone remain for me..."

Really, within that short space of time so many thoughts and anxieties and choices took place in my mind.

On the other hand the one in the guise of Sri Krishna remained determined to give me initiation. He seized both my hands and leaned towards me. Because I had been sitting in meditation for some time, the lower part of my body had become heavy and stiff - that used to happen to me when I was in Brindavan - so I could not move quickly to avoid him. Still in a sitting-position, I called out to my master.

But I could not prevent him: still holding on to my two hands, he leaned over and whispered a mantra in my ear.

But after the initiation was given, all the restlessness and disturbance were gone from my mind; I felt no resistance towards that Krishna, although he had initiated me forcibly despite my unwillingness. Instead my whole being felt perfectly quiet and pure. In my mind appeard the thought that what was meant to happen and was auspicious for me had taken place in my soul. An for this reason alone, I was able to behave very simply and naturally. I said to him,

"Let us eat now." - and I bagan to open the lid of the pot.

He too, searching in his own wallet, said,

"How can you share with me from such a small pot? Wait, let me see what I can find..."

I thought that he too perhaps had some bread and dal obtained by madhukari from chhatras like me. But he pulled out of his wallet a small package wrapped in leaves; it contained some *puri*, vegetable, sweets and so on. Between us in the end we had so much food that quite a bit was left over. We shared our picnic feast with the nearby tortoises in the river and whole flock of wild ducks who were swimming on the Yamuna.

We left the bank of Yamuna a little earlier than I usually did, he going off towards Keshi's ghat, and I towards the old Govinda temple.

The very next day I was to leave Brindavan.

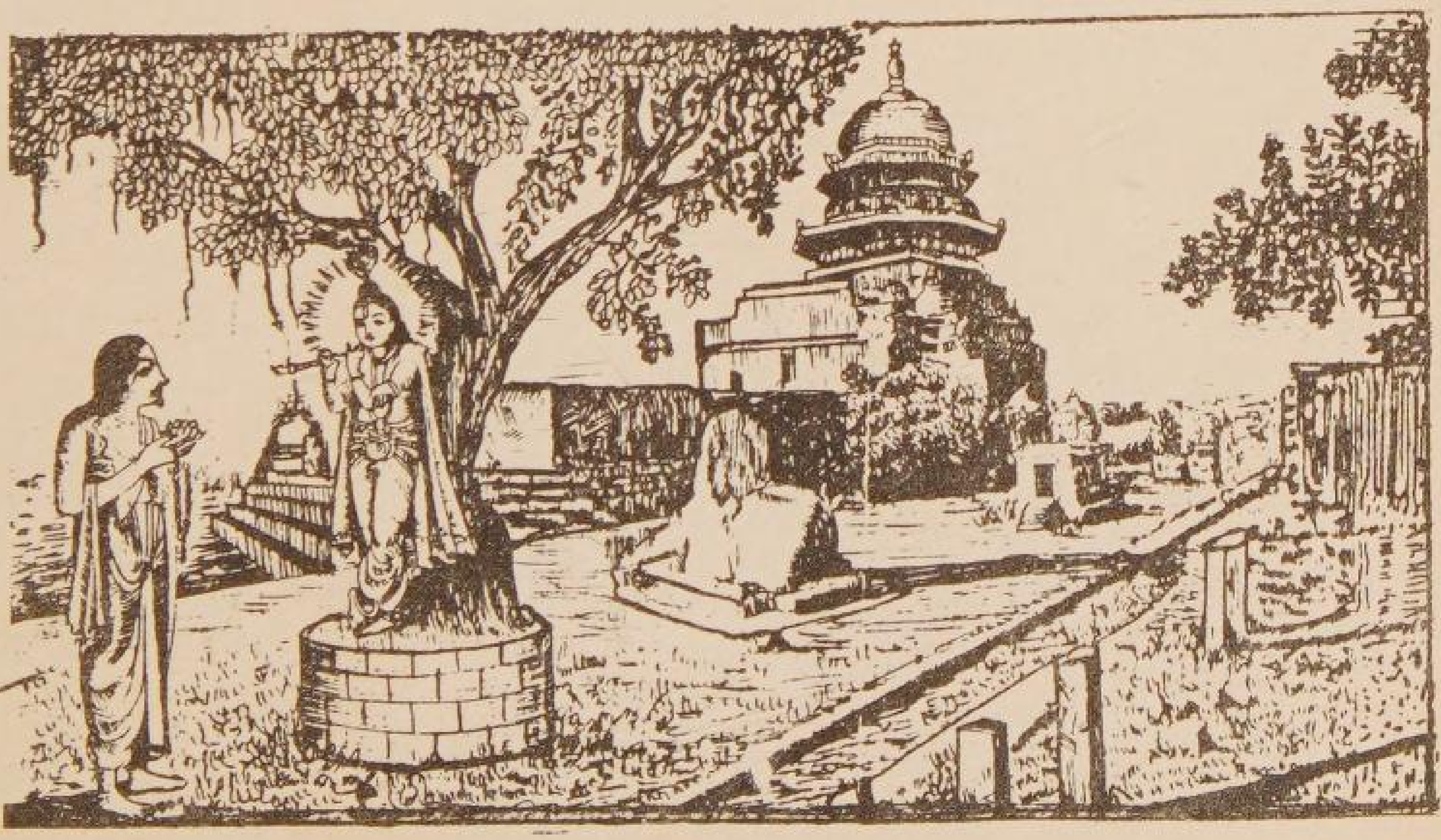
I had decided to go to a chhatra in the mornig and to start my journey after receiving Radhrani's preasad. The Delhi chattra was retail chhatra - that meant that it did not give a complete meal, only one piece of bread and a little dal; but it opened before all the other chhatras. Our madhukari often started there. So I took prasad in the Delhi chhatra at eight or nine o clock in the morning. From there I went into a nearby ruined building to change into my brand new clothes.

On the way I had dicided to rely entirely on surrender to the Divine, and take only whatever subsistence came to me without begging...so I would not take any water-pot, blanket, towel or banian with me. I would take nothing. Just a few days before I had been given the blanket. That was still really new. I had wished to give my pot and blanket away to some beggar...but I did not find the opportunity. So I left all my worldly possessions behind in that room.

So I set off for Pondicherry.

After touching the earth of Brindavan for one last time and saying goodbye to Radha and Krishna once more, and spreading some of its sacred dust upon my forehead, I set off down that long road, my heart singing with sincere gratitude:

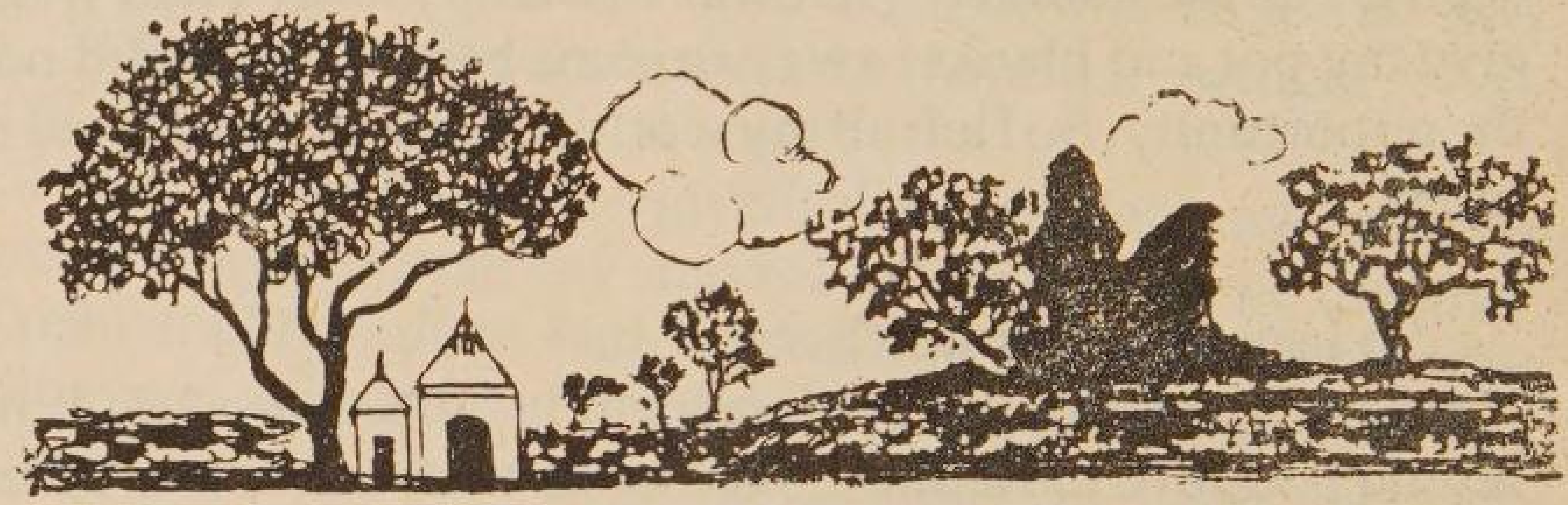
"Sweet, oh how sweet you are!
O Lord of sweet feellings!
And sweet have I found your Brindavan
Whare you live forever!"



Notes and Reference

1. The reader may remember the incident in which Sri Krishna stole the clothes of the gopis - it happened in Brindavan, on that very same bank of the Yamuna.

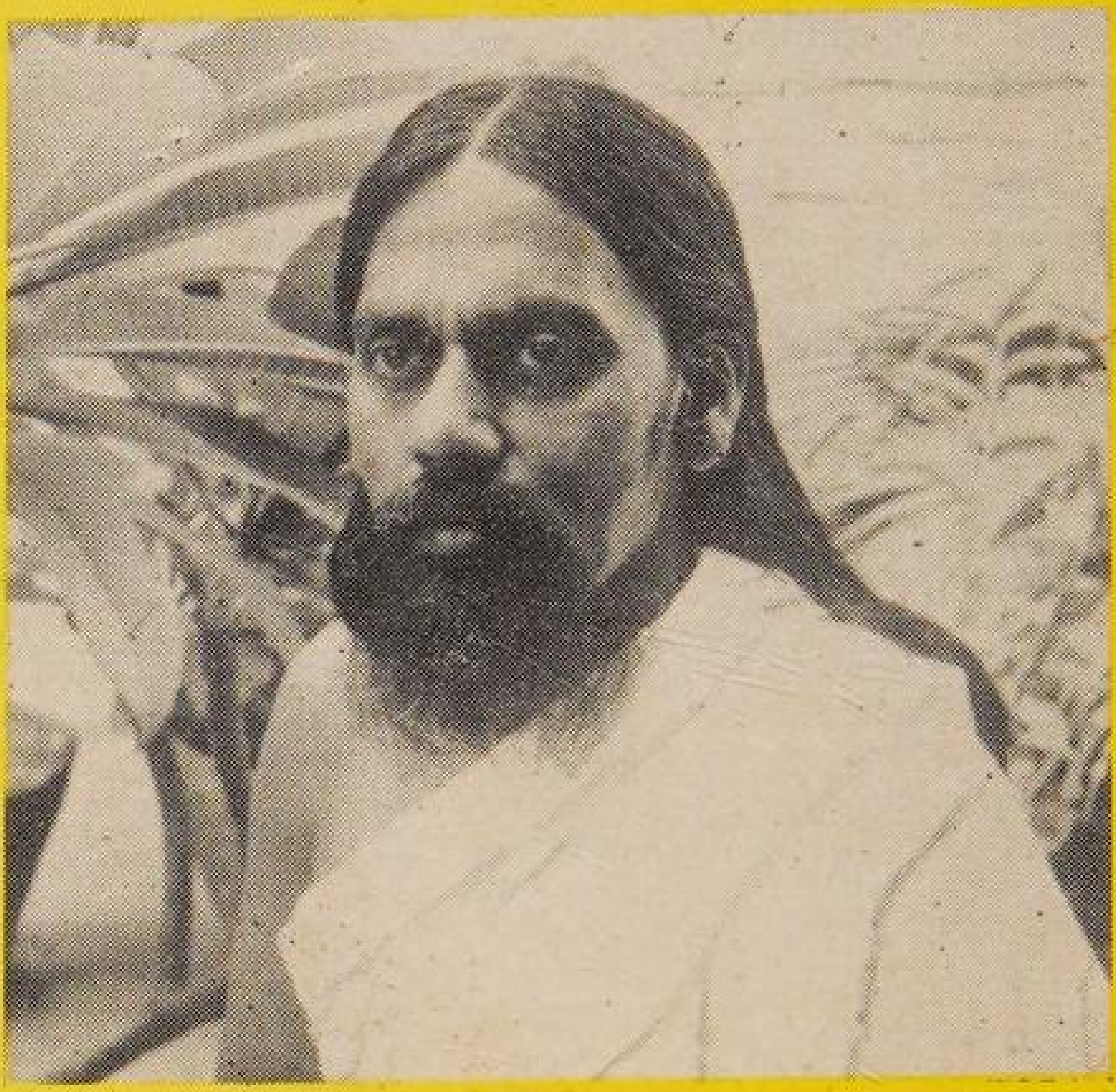
2. Darshan : seeing the gods in a physical body as we see other people.



About the Book

The editor of *'Rupanway'* reported — "He set out from home on a long journey. Young and inexperienced as he was, this wayfarer soon found himself caught up in a situation that can only be called an ádventure. The people and the incident that did cross his path were nothing short of extraordinary. What a strange roll of wonderful characters : Sumitaji of Mirzapur Dharamshala, an East-Bengal refugee Netai Bouri, Bepin Brajabasi and Sharmaji. More wonderful still were the male and female Vaishnavas, the saints and recluses, the hospitality of Chhatras and Madhukari celebrations, temples and shrines, ashrams and monasteries, garden paths and bathing places of the Land of Love! But most wonderful of all were the Brajanganas of Banke Beharji's temple. All of them will appeal to beckon the reader as if from a mystic realm !

"But the reader will be surprised to discover that the man who was so deeply turned towards Sri Aurobindo spent his days thirsting for nectar in Brindavan, and after much hardship and suffering finally he was caught by the bracelet of Radharani ! Trully, miracles still happen in Brindavan !"



....And as is the incident so is the author's life too. Author Anil Mohan has renounced his title and became 'Kripavikshu', i.e. Grace - mendicant.

The penman's career started in a strange manner. One day in Calcutta, while observing the immersion of the image of Saraswati, all at once his mind became vacant. This condition continued for three days. Then by degrees spiritual realisation and vision descended from above followed by a vehement flood of creative force which pressed him to become a great literateur and writer. But the author simply asserted: "No, no, I don't wish to be a great writer; I just want to be a servitor of Truth!"

MIRACULOUS GRACE, the other marvellous book of the Author, created a great stir in the reading public as well as in journals, and published in many Indian languages like this book.

ISBN-81-85318-55-7 **Rs.230**

H.K. PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS
A1/11 Shakti Nagar Extn
DELHI-110052